Stephanie Jenkins - [Siren's Call 01] - Lure

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LURE

By Stephanie Jenkins

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PubIt! Edition

CHAPTER ONE

I despised the odor of fish; an unfortunate problem for someone stuck serving the grub to tourists every weekend. The smell clung to my hair, clothes, and the seats of my crappy car. Febreze never worked and perfume—even the overpowering, cheap brand old women douse themselves in—made the scent worse. Trust me, I'd tried it *all*.

Rob, my boss, nodded at a tray of drinks. "Take these to six."

"Can't," I said. I inhaled the glass closest to me and, sadly, almost drooled. White Russian. "Seventeen, remember?" Besides, I was having a bad night. Good chance I'd take a sip or down the entire thing before the order reached the table.

He opened his mouth but immediately shut it after looking around the restaurant. My boss is smart. Cops always come to Romano's on Saturday nights and have no problem calling Rob out on letting a minor carry alcohol. Kim, the college girl who'd spent the past week flashing her ID to everyone, shuffled from the kitchen. Rob flagged her down before she came around the bar. "Switch sections with Charlotte."

Absolutely wonderful.

He was putting me in the section furthest away from the bar. You know, the buzz kill area. *That* section usually consisted of middle school kids on first dates and families with toddlers who threw ranch dressing at my hair. *That* section also meant fewer drunks and five percent tips. Most evenings, Rob carried the drinks for me, but tonight we were busy and short-staffed.

Kim made a face but scooped up the tray. "Oh, well." Fluffing the back of her skunk-colored reverse mullet, she flashed me a satisfied smirk that Rob somehow failed to notice, and added, "Too bad for you, Char. Horrible tips in my section tonight!"

"Horrible tips in my section," I mimicked when she was out of earshot. She knew I counted on my tips. Less than a week before, I'd told her how I wanted to start saving up for school because my dad's salary alone wasn't going to cut it for tuition. Now I wish I'd taken my usual approach toward Kim: evade and ignore. I took a pitcher of tea off the bar counter and stalked to my new area, coming face to face with four Summer Boys sitting down. Rich kids flocked to Gloucester with their parents every June through August. Depending on when they had to go back to private school, some stuck around past Labor Day. Rob claimed they were good for business. Maybe he failed to realize their negative effect on my sanity.

I sat the tea on the table and fumbled in my apron for my pen and pad. “Can I take your order?”

“What's good here?” one of the boys asked. The voice sounded different, *Southern.* Nothing like the crisp, refined accent of most Summer Kids. I quit staring at my pocket and looked around the table, attempting to pinpoint who spoke to me. When I didn’t answer the question immediately, the only blonde in the group said, “Never mind. Just get me your favorite.”

“I don't eat meat, especially not fish,” I blurted.

Nice one, Brewer.

His mouth curled into a grin. He tilted his head to one side, sizing me up. “What do you eat, then?”

The other guys at the table snickered.

Lucky me. I hit the Summer Kid jackpot: Pervs. I threw a quick glance over my shoulder. Rob’s frown told me I couldn’t get away with knocking tea into a customer’s lap.

“I'm a vegan,” I said. Our eyes stayed connected for a few more seconds then I dragged my gaze to the top of his head. Why had I even answered him? Boys like him—golden boys with pressed Polo shirts and cocky smiles—were the ones I avoided. Shiny, superficial, and predictable. “Now, how may I help you?”

They ordered steak, typical for Summer Kids, but I couldn’t help feeling grossed out as I thought of the poor cows that would be served, medium rare. Before I made my way to the kitchen, my friends, Andy and Sophie, stopped me at the bar. She held a menu even though she knew every entrée and appetizer by heart. They were early tonight. I mean, I always expected them to show their faces at some point on Friday and Saturday nights, but that rarely happened before nine.

“Why are you here?” I asked. My impatience was impossible to hide, and a woman walking past us looked over her shoulder, casting a dark glare at me. She probably thought I was being an ass to paying customers. If that were true, maybe I wouldn’t be so frustrated. My friends loitered, and whenever that happened, Rob cornered me after work for a heart to heart about mixing business with my social life. I never argued with him, but in reality, my personal life was about as exciting as the *Behind the Music* marathons my dad loved. At the end of every talk, Rob told me to stay off drugs.

Yeah, my boss had a bipolar method of showing he cared.

Sophie lifted dilated pupils, twirled a frizzy, wheat-colored curl around one finger, and gave me a half-smile that was more of a grimace. “Just wanted to see you, Char.” It wasn’t seven o’clock yet, and she was high. Andy shrugged. Like always, visiting me was *her* idea. He tagged along so she wouldn't total her car.

And because six months ago, he figured out he was crazy about her. It had to suck for him. They were practically attached at the hip, which meant he was stuck watching her bounce from boyfriend to boyfriend.

"Rob has a no beggar policy. And stop stalking the bartender, I'll hear it for that, too." I scratched a mosquito bite on my wrist and jerked my head toward my section. "Let me go run this order to the back. Sit wherever."

"Bring me a Coke," Andy called after me. What a moocher.

Still, regardless of how much Rob whined about their visits or how many sodas they downed, I was a chocolate heart when it came to my friends. I absolutely could not ask them to leave. The three of us had been inseparable since preschool when we discovered that rolled-up balls of Wonder Bread made awesome lunch table ammo. Last year, they were the only friends who defended Mom against the rumors before, and after, she died.

They were munching on corn muffins when I found their booth, the one with the faded upholstery in the back of the restaurant. I plunked Andy's drink in front of him. "Where'd you get those?"

"Your boss," he said. That's what I figured. For someone who whined constantly about how personal relationships hurt business, Rob sure as hell did a great job making my nonpaying friends feel welcome.

"You do realize that when you eat for free, my paycheck disappears, right?"

Andy rolled his eyes as he dug into his pocket. He smacked five dollars onto the table. "We good?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Not even close, friend, but keep saving your allowance. I'll send you a bill for all the times Rob's screwed me *and* my check over." Under the harsh lighting, I finally noticed that Sophie was wearing makeup. "Plans tonight?"

"Party at The Lighthouse tonight," she lisped. "You're coming with."

That explained their visit. Sophie learned a long time ago that I had no issue saying "no" over the phone. If she annoyed me, the mute button was my new BFF. Face to face requests were an entirely different story because I failed at turning her down in person. My eyebrows knotted together. "They always get busted. You know how my dad is about alcohol," I said.

Andy stared behind me, lifting his chin. "I think you're being summoned." I followed his gaze and snorted when I saw Golden Boy waving me over. When he saw that he had my attention, a dumbass grin plastered across his face. Suck it up and wait, I thought.

Sophie's eyelids lowered. She dropped her head to Andy's shoulder and groped at his hair like she always did when she was high. Two

weeks ago, he cut his massive, curly afro. We'd teased him about looking like the kid from High School Musical for months before he finally gave in and begged the stylist at the mall to attack his hair with clippers. Her mouth curled down in disappointment, as if she just now realized his hair was gone. "Come on, Char, have some fun."

She was already in her fun place for the evening, messed up and absolutely out of it.

Golden Boy bounced in his seat now, flailing his hand above his head like a kindergarten kid on the first day of school. I reached the table before Rob made it past the first few in my section. He glowered at me then left to find someone else to hassle.

"What can I get for you?"

Golden wiggled his glass at me. A few chunks of melted ice clinked around the bottom. "My drink is empty."

Rob claimed that a happy customer was a constant customer. The problem with his motto was that I didn't want Summer Kids to return. "Let me get you another." I pried the glass from his grip. His hand covered mine, and as we touched, a static shock rushed up my wrist. He felt it, too. Soft fingertips slid across the back of my hand, as if he hoped it would happen once more.

I would be stupid if I let it, so I pulled away. Tiny hairs on my arm stood on end. "So, Vegan Girl, I wondered . . . can I get your number?"

A seemingly innocent request, but the sensation from our touch stopped. I was so not this kid's type. I towered over half the boys in my class, and my curves meant that I would never be a supermodel. His type chased thin, preppy girls who giggled when he spoke. Not smartasses like me. He was pretending to be interested in me and that kind of irritated me.

Okay, correction, it bothered me so much my head buzzed.

"Against restaurant policy," I said.

That was far from the truth since my boss only cared whether his customers returned. If that meant me trading digits with random men —including truck drivers with skinny legs, beer guts, and energy drink fetishes—Rob was 100% for it.

Golden Boy asked for my number once more when I returned with his Sprite. His friends smirked, nodding their heads. Hounding waiters must have been their routine.

"747-7633," I said.

No questions about why I changed my mind. He just eyeballed my nametag and typed into his fancy cell phone. Sucked he didn't have a normal keypad. Then he would have realized the numbers I gave him spelled "piss off". But later, when he tried to call me for a midnight hookup, he'd figure it out. I gave the group a sugary smile. "Be back

with your food in a few."

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Sophie and Andy left around the same time as the Summer Boys. They were still pressuring me about the party as I forced them out the front doors, and I promised to call after my shift.

Golden Boy winked at me before he left—a guarantee he would make a lame attempt at calling my fake number later. Like I said, Summer Kids and predictability go hand in hand. His party climbed into a shiny pearl white Dodge truck, and I was, admittedly, a little envious. At least they left a decent tip. Fifteen dollars, or in P.O.S. Jeep language: A quarter tank of gas.

"Say hello to your dad and Cameron for me," Rob said as I swiped my bag from beneath the bar.

I cringed. "Yeah, I will. 'Night, Rob." If Dad was at home and my brother sober, I would be ecstatic, but there was a better chance of me choking down Sunday's Lobster Special. Rob knew that, too.

I stepped outside, rotated my face toward the sea, and drew in a gigantic breath of salty air. It was an evening ritual and my favorite part about working at Romano's—the waterfront location soothed me.

When I heard the music, I was almost to my car. My feet automatically twisted me around and pulled me across the street. I didn't realize I'd reached the dock until the boards beneath me creaked. An old fear pinched my heart, and my fingertips clamped around the cold, moist railing. Metal and wood. The only thing separating me from drowning was metal and wood, yet I continued walking. I didn't have a choice, it was impossible to turn around. I sank to my knees, wood from the dock scraping through my thin work pants.

I didn't care.

The woman's voice reached out to me in the darkness. It begged me to come closer, and I gripped a weathered post and strained my neck to listen. Whispery, strong singing teased my senses, and though the lyrics were indecipherable, I recognized the heartbreaking lullaby as a warning.

Death and chaos waits beneath the waves. The music grew louder, until I shivered and my spine tingled. *Come to me. It never hurts for long.*

I recoiled and nearly fell from my perch but rough hands steadied me. "Charlotte, what are you doing?" Rob stared down at me, eyes bulging.

"Huh?"

His fingers dug into my upper arm as he steered me from the edge of the pier. "You were leaned over. I thought you were *sick*." The way he whispered the last word told me he thought I was a suicidal

maniac.

Fantastic.

“I heard singing,” I said lamely.

His forehead scrunched into a deeper frown. He let go of my arm so he could scratch his chin. “We’re the only ones out here; everyone else is gone for the night.”

“Huh?” God, I was starting to sound like a ditz.

Rob spoke slowly this time, opening his mouth wider than usual. “You’ve been off for forty-five minutes.”

I started to argue with him, but then I checked my watch. It was ten-fifty, and Rob was right. “Are you high, Charlotte? Because you know the rules!”

“No, I-I have a migraine.” Just to reassure him, I squeezed the area between my eyes. It was useless. Tomorrow, he’d send me to the hospital for a random pee test. I was starting to get used to them.

Once he became worried, shaking him off was impossible. He insisted on walking me to my car. I climbed in, cursing myself for being dumb enough to say I heard voices. “Get some sleep, kid. You don’t look too good,” he said. He closed the door and rapped his fingertips on the window. My breath caught when I met his stare and saw pity.

As I left Romano’s, I wanted to slam on the gas so I could make a fast getaway, but I drove slowly. It wasn’t worth Rob waving me down to give a lecture about the safety hazards of speeding in parking lots. I’d heard it too many times to count. Despite the warm evening, and the fact the Jeep’s air conditioner quit on me last month, I left the windows up. The only sound in my car rattled from the ancient twentieth century engine.

I slipped into my house fifteen minutes later. Just as I figured, my father was at work. Cam was asleep in the "Man Room" (aka the garage) with a half-empty Jim Beam bottle by the couch. I lifted his feet and ankles and plopped down. He didn’t budge. Cam always liked partying, but after Mom died, the drinking became excessive. Finding him like this on a regular basis put me in a crappy position. I’d confronted him more than once, but the conversations that started out hushed quickly turned into screaming matches that Dad had to break up.

Pushing myself to my feet, I yanked a throw blanket off the back of the couch and draped it over him. “Love you, big brother,” I whispered. When we were kids, Mom made us tell each other that every night before bed. We hated it then, but now I couldn’t help saying it every time I found Cam passed out. I missed my brother.

I picked up the bottle and sniffed at it before screwing the cap back on. Johnny Knoxville caught my eye on the TV screen, and I hit the

power button. “Yeah, screw you, too.”

My cell phone vibrated against my hip as I stepped into my bedroom. It was Sophie. "Are you coming?" she asked. Dad would be at the hospital for another five hours. No point in having a one-person family fun night, right? “Yeah, give me thirty,” I said.

"Bring alcohol," she slurred. As if she needed to mix liquor with whatever her pill-of-choice was for the night. Still, I stuffed the bottle in my bag. Would Cam remember whether or not he drank the whole thing? Negative. Dad would go crazy if he knew Cam was drinking again, so my brother shouldn’t mind if I took the evidence.

I left fifteen minutes later. He was still breathing when I helped him to his room.

CHAPTER TWO

Just about every summer party in Gloucester is held at The Lighthouse. Privately owned by a West Coast family that never came to town, it was the perfect spot for drinking and smoking up. It was also the police department's favorite place to go when they were bored and needed to dole out underage drinking tickets. Sophie and Andy stumbled up the rocks to meet me while I locked my car doors. Before she spoke a word, her cigarette-free hand plucked the bottle from my bag. "Awesome." She wagged her head toward the beach. "They only have beer . . . and it's hot. Cam not coming?"

Was she trying to be funny? "He's asleep."

"Took you a while to get here," Andy said as I strode beside him. I thought of the forty-five minutes of my life I lost after work, the weird voice that snared me during that time. "We had a group of Summer Kids come in after you left. You know Rob never likes to kick them out," I lied.

Sophie's face twisted. "Rob will do anything for money." She flicked her cigarette butt into the air and wiggled her eyebrows and hips suggestively.

Quite a few kids from school were at the party, but I didn't recognize the majority of people surrounding us. Sophie's tattered Gloucester High blanket was bunched up in the sand. Andy and I sat down, and Sophie danced off with the bottle of whiskey. A guy from last semester's Physics class passed by, waving at me. I pretended he didn't exist. "What's she on tonight?" I asked.

Andy chewed his lip while he watched Sophie flirt with a guy standing by the cooler. She was sharing *my* stolen booze with him. "Blues," he said.

Xanax was Sophie's favorite because they were a cheap thrill. Her habit began after a fling with a Summer Boy. "A few pills will take the edge off," she'd promised. Two years later, though, her pity party was still in full swing.

I grabbed Andy's drink and chugged, drowning the day's misery. Sophie was right; the beer was warm and gross. He walked to the cooler and returned with four cans. "You're a champ." He gave me two of his beers.

A vivid picture of Cam slumped over in front of the television crept into my mind. Was he a champ, too? Because, the way I saw it, drinking by yourself on a Saturday night was rock bottom, especially when you toss in *Jackass* reruns. Andy and I drank quietly for a few minutes. Finally, I spoke, my voice trembling. "Want to change spots?"

We took the blanket near the water, and I sat down again, stretching my legs out. Sea foam tickled the bottom of my feet. “Doesn’t that bother you?” Andy pointed to the soaked hem of my jeans.

I sidled close enough for our shoulders to rub. “I’m weird.”

“You’ll hit me if I agree. Getting another drink, want one?”

“Two.” His eyebrows lifted at my answer, but I smiled sweetly. “Please?”

“You’re cute when you make that face, but I’m cutting you off soon.” No matter how much he warned, Andy never followed through. Less than a minute later, he slid down beside of me. “You’re getting quick at this,” I said.

“Expecting me?” someone drawled. I knew who it was from the voice and the warm breath on my neck that reeked of coconut rum.

It was Kyle Sanford’s signature scent.

“Harassment is illegal.” I turned toward him, wishing I could shoot flames from my eyes. Pepper spray was just as useful. I patted around the blanket for my car keys. “Get lost or I’ll spray you blind.”

He winked—a taunt that challenged me to hurry up and do it. Kyle’s baby face looks might have fooled his parents, our classmates, and even 95% of the town, but not me. Underneath his clean cut exterior was a liar.

And a murderer, as far as I was concerned.

“Can’t we be friends for one night?” He sounded angelic, and if I were anyone else, his act would seem believable. We both knew that his desire to be friends equaled my need to stand in front of a speeding bus. “You really do look like her.”

I ground my teeth together and groped the blanket. *Where are those stupid keys?* One year. Kyle had spent just over one year taking a jab at me every chance he got. It was tiring and humiliating. I fought back, obviously, but I wasn’t immune to his comments. “I’d kill you if I could.”

“Psycho bitches turn me on,” he teased. “I always wanted you more than Ms. B . . .”

Before I could stop myself, I snatched the front of his shirt and yanked him to me, not caring that his clothes ripped under my grip. “Leave. My mom. Out of this.”

His smile widened. “Anger management, Charlotte,” he said softly. He dug into his pocket and tossed my keys in my lap. “Maybe I’ll come back when you’re really drunk. Should be fun.”

I was thankful for the seedy beach lighting. No point in fueling his screwed up cause by letting him see tears. By the time Andy came back, I’d cleaned my face and shoved the conversation with Kyle to a dark spot in my mind. Thinking of ways to get him back was easier

when my thoughts were clear.

Andy dangled a balled up piece of paper under my nose. “Look what I got.”

“Hmm?”

He nodded to a group of girls congregated around a radio. Bony hips swayed offbeat to a pop song, and all seven held red plastic cups. “The blonde’s number.” Random phone numbers were his way of getting back at Sophie’s flirting. Of course, his revenge would be more effective if she actually noticed.

Only one brunette hung out with the bunch, but I told him his mystery woman was cute. Asking him to specify meant surrendering my drinks while he tried to explain, and after my chat with Kyle, I needed them. I opened both palms. He grudgingly shoved the beer in my direction. “Cut off. Don’t forget it, Char.”

Whatever. I stared straight ahead, attempting to tune out all noise around me. It worked at first, but after five minutes, my head throbbed from the mixed conversations. The girls at the radio were squealing and the guy on the blanket a few feet away from us yelled at his girlfriend for being wasted “again.” I wished for the set of earplugs in my nightstand drawer. Suddenly, all the noise stopped. My happiness was short-lived, though, because a new sound assaulted me.

The voice from the harbor.

Why was it *here*? I started to scramble to my feet so I could get away from the sea. A jolt rushed through my body, leaving me paralyzed. “Andy! Do you hear that?”

He ogled something across the beach. Distracted, he twisted to me. “What?”

“Someone’s singing behind those rocks.” I could barely muster enough strength to lift my arm, but I managed to wiggle a finger at the water.

I saw uncertainty in his eyes. Uncertainty and fear and concern. *Oh god, he thinks I’m crazy.* “No . . . just the radio. Sounds like Lady GaGa.”

I clenched my fists in the sand to wrestle the need to cover my ears. *Shut up! Shut the hell up!* Maybe I *was* crazy. Or worse. Crazy people only heard voices. An aria played on repetitive loop in my head. “I’m just drunk . . .”

“Do you still”--he paused and slid a finger under my chin so he could look into my eyes--“hear the voices?” he asked hesitantly. He sounded like the shrink Dad made me go to after my mom died.

“No,” I lied.

“Andy! Andy!” The out-of-breath voice stopped him from saying something else to me. A skinny brunette girl ran up to us. She bent down and whispered into his ear. His brown eyes slowly widened and

he thanked her before she left. Jumping to his feet, he held up a finger. “Don’t move! Sophie might be in trouble. Be right back, okay?” He didn’t give me time to respond. He sprinted off, leaving me alone.

I wanted to be concerned about Sophie--really, I did--but the voice was right in front of me, sharing a deafening, melodic secret. The music pulled me to my feet, like a puppet master, and steered me into the sea. I sloshed through the waves and stumbled because my clothes weighed me down.

Maybe Andy called my name. Or the boy from Physics I brushed off earlier. Frantic screaming that wasn’t enough to force me to turn.

The music stopped. I hit the water. And I sank.

I struggled at first. *Maybe, if my clothes weren’t so heavy . . .* Or if I hadn't drunk anything. I opened my mouth to scream, but the salt water seared down my throat and drowned my lungs.

The unforgiving tide dragged me down.

I let it submerge me, allowed my eyes to close from the painful pressure as I sank deeper.

Into delirious darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

I had to be in hell.

Fire scalded my vision, and I couldn't think of anything else that justified why my entire left side felt as if someone had attacked me with a hot kettle. Something rough and damp dug into my palms as I hoisted myself to a sitting position. Inhaling, I turned toward the brightness. Big mistake for my vision, but at least now I knew that I was still alive. The light came from a flashlight.

A man squatted down to look at me. "Are you Charlotte?"

"Yeah." I hardly recognized the raw, desperate noise coming from my throat. He realized that he was giving me permanent eye damage and shut off the flashlight. I immediately recognized where I was when he helped me to my feet: on the rocks by The Lighthouse.

He pulled out his radio and announced, "This is Nelson. I found Charlotte Brewer. Alive."

Some girls get off on being the center of attention and by now, most of them would be in tears that were two parts genuine, one part bullshit. Not me. I had a theory that if I faded into the background, nobody would bother me. Unfortunately, the fact that I almost died blew my system to smithereens, and a million questions bombarded me once the rest of the crew showed up. *Are you okay? Do you feel dizzy? Want something to drink?* Someone pulled a heavy, wool blanket around my shoulders, and a woman with a gap-toothed smile and a slight Spanish accent tried to talk me into getting on a stretcher. I refused. When I saw my dad pushing through the hoard of people, I rushed toward him.

His arms squashed around me. "What were you trying to do?" He hadn't showered after work because he smelled like the antiseptic sanitizer the hospital coveted. My stomach heaved. "I thought I lost you, *too*."

Thinking about my mom sent uncomfortable tingles from the back of my skull to the tip of my nose. I wanted to scream. Instead, I bit my bottom lip until copper flooded my tongue. "I'm not her." I'd said it more than once over the past year, but he always compared me to her when I did something that worried him.

Calloused hands patted my waterlogged arm. The rescue worker who found me. "Charlotte, we're going to have to examine you for—"

"She's fine," my father snapped. The man jerked away, surprised. Dad pulled in a long breath, and then calmly added, "Please, just give us some time. I'll make sure she gets medical attention as soon as possible."

My recovering-from-near-death bonding moment lasted for

approximately five minutes. Two police officers waited in front of The Lighthouse, clutching radios and wearing smirks. *Damn*. I learned to fear them after they became a constant presence at our house after Mom got in trouble, just before she died.

"We need to ask you a few questions, Miss Brewer," said the chunky office, whose nameplate read **HALE**. A breathalyzer seemed to appear out of nowhere. Wasn't it his civic duty to make sure I wouldn't die? Or at least guide me to a vehicle so I wouldn't freeze.

I jerked my head toward my father. He glowered at the cops. "Can't this wait?" His request earned two shaking heads: one bald, the other a curly, orange mop.

"There was a party here tonight. Did you consume alcohol at said party, Miss Brewer?" Officer Hale asked. I shook my head. Did he expect me to throw myself under the bus willingly? He shoved the breathalyzer at me.

I was in major trouble. Dad's head would explode if he found out I was drinking. "I'm going to puke," I lied. Shaking his head to each side, the cop made no effort to move. I groaned and followed his order.

Hale made me puff into the breathalyzer for an eternity. At last, he muttered, "This thing's broken." He tapped on the tiny black device then turned it upside down, shaking it. I almost expected him to call it his "precious" because he yanked it to his chest when I attempted to look at the screen.

Protective much?

He interrupted Dad's argument and borrowed his partner's breathalyzer. This time, the doom tester was bright yellow and looked like a skinny flashlight. Just as before, Officer Hale was convinced it was a dud.

Dad stepped between us, his face and neck a vibrant shade of purple. "What's the problem?" This was embarrassing for him. And painful.

I hung my head.

Officer Hale glanced between the yellow and black breathalyzers and at me. "Doesn't make any sense," he said to nobody in particular. Then, he lifted his shoulders and told Dad, "She's clean, I guess."

Dad rocked back and forth on his heels. "You guess?"

"That's right. I *guess.* She shut the machines off as soon as she blew into them."

Two broken alcohol testers? I was never a fan of Magic Eight Balls, but maybe this was my lucky night. Sort of. At least I wouldn't have to put up with the meltdown that would ensue if Dad discovered I was drinking.

The haze weighing my brain down started to clear, and I

remembered Andy and Sophie. Were they freaking out right now, wondering if I was dead or alive? “What happened to—” The glint in Officer Hale’s eyes warned me of his anticipation to bust someone. “Nothing.”

Dad sighed. “They already know your friends were with you, kiddo. Andy called the cops. He’s at the police station.”

My fists balled up by my side. I stared at my bare feet while Officer Hale scribbled on a pink pad of paper and spoke under his breath about the problem with today’s youth. Was Andy the only person who stuck around? I imagined the pandemonium after I went under, followed by everyone piling in their cars so they wouldn’t have to answer questions about the drowned girl. I just hoped Andy wasn’t in trouble because of me.

Officer Hale mashed the paper into my hand. I held it up in the direction of the patrol car headlights. Oh my God. It was a trespassing ticket. “Why would you give me this?”

“General trespassing is a crime,” Officer Red chimed in.

In other words, since they could not get me for underage drinking, they pinned me with something else. Fail. I crumpled the ticket and stuffed it in my damp pocket, but I wanted to chuck it back at them. “Can you at least tell me if Andy is in trouble?”

A condescending semi-smile changed Officer Hale’s face from mean to just plain creepy. He looked like a Jack-o-Lantern, except pasty *and* waxy. “Well that’s between Andrew and his parents. Privacy policy, I’m sure you understand.”

Of course I understood privacy, but my rescue wouldn‘t exactly be classified. The hot gossip tumbling from everyone’s lips like hangover vomit the next day would be me—soaked, shoeless, and standing in front of The Lighthouse in a heap of trouble. Courtesy of Officer Hale and his partner.

Do you remember Melanie Brewer? Her kid, Charlotte, is just as messed up as she was. Crazy girl got drunk and tried to kill herself last night.

A shiver crept through my bones. “You need to see a doctor, Charlotte?” Red asked.

Rescue crews and the police department was one thing, but I would never be able to show my face in public again if I went to the ER. Neither would my father, since he was a trauma nurse. “I’m fine, I swear. It was just an accident.”

Dad mumbled something incoherent, but I caught a few four-letter words. Judging by their pinched faces, so did the cops. Officer Hale sneered. “She has court in two months, Mr. Brewer. Make sure she’s there.” He crossed his arms over his chest and struck a self-assured pose that belonged to a Gap model instead of a middle-aged cop with male pattern baldness. “You’re lucky I didn’t arrest her.”

On the ride home, Dad yelled so much, I knew he would need cough drops in the morning. He claimed Child Services would try to take me away from him. Kids my age trespassed all the time, but he assured me it was different with us, that everyone would think badly of his parenting because of what happened to my mom.

I wanted to tell him nobody thought like that. I didn't, though, because even I knew the difference between a plausible lie and an incredibly stupid one.

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I didn't sleep. Not because I heard Dad pacing down the hall, his hushed voice admonishing the photo of a woman who could no longer defend herself. Or because his last words to me were "You're grounded, kiddo. One month."

I didn't sleep because I couldn't.

I gazed at the glow-in-the dark stars plastered on the popcorn ceiling in my bedroom and wondered how I awakened on the rocks. The tide should have carried me away, so why was I alive? "Great job being grateful," I muttered, punching flat pillows. The clock on my nightstand read 4:15, and although I needed sleep, I lay thinking about how my body burned underwater.

When I was seven, I'd dived into the community pool, knowing I couldn't swim. Calm, bleach-scented water had grabbed at my legs, entwining itself around my entire body until my feet touched the pool floor. My brother came in after me. Every time we passed by the community center, he mentioned how he saved me. Nobody helped me tonight, though. Instead of tranquil water threatening me, like the day at the pool, the sea was violent. But somehow, I'd made it to the rocks. I shut my eyes and tried to come up with even the tiniest memory about what happened after I went under.

Nothing.

"What's wrong with me?" I turned on my side and squeezed the last bit of fluff out of my pillow.

The next time I looked at the clock, it was a little after eight, and Dad pounded on my door. "Sophie and Andrew are here!" Groaning, I sat up and raked numb hands down my face. They wouldn't leave until I gave a decent explanation. How do you justify strolling into the sea like a champion swimmer when you can't even doggy paddle? The truth was always a possibility: music entranced me. That sounded ignorant and psychotic, especially to my own ears.

I put on a pair of pajama bottoms and opened the door to the wide-eyed stares of my friends.

For the first time in weeks, Sophie didn't look high.

"I'm torn," Andy said. "I want to hug you but I also want to kick you in the knee cap." They brushed past me. After I closed the door,

he took the high road, throwing his arms around me and suffocating me with an embrace. “What *happened* to you?”

I looked over his shoulder at Sophie, and my excuse knocked me in the head. “Ambien!” I cried. “I bought Ambien from Jason at work.” Except for the occasional aspirin, I never took pills. Too scared of dying, as lame as that sounds. I prayed I could chalk my actions up to the side effects of alcohol and sleeping medication.

Andy pulled back, blinking. Once the initial shock passed, I saw a flash of fury in his dark eyes. Dumbest. Lie. Ever. Why did I drop the name of a real person? Hopefully he wouldn’t say anything to Jason. “You took Ambien?” His voice was hushed, as if I committed a cardinal sin. “I can’t believe you.” He turned to Sophie, jabbed a finger at her, and mouthed, “I blame this on you.”

Her head and shoulders drooped.

Great, now he thought I was a certified pill popper. Andy tried not to hassle Sophie too much about the pills because he feared losing her. He claimed that the best way to get through to her was to take a few steps back. The fact he blamed my situation on her told me he was livid.

“Not like you’re thinking! I just have . . . trouble sleeping. Didn’t plan on going to the party, you know?” My words tumbled out in one breath, and I smiled to avoid squinting. Sophie always called me out for bullshit when I squinted.

Her head was still down, so she didn't catch my fib. Knocking him aside, she squeezed me hard. “If something had happened to you—” Sophie is shorter than me by a half foot, so when I tried to speak, I swallowed a mouthful of curly, blonde hair. I smacked my lips together to get rid of the taste of mousse. “Don’t do it again! Ever.”

“Sorry I scared you guys,” I said.

Sophie let go of me and plopped down on the bed. The mattress springs pinged beneath her. She lay on her back and hung her head off the edge until her hair swept the hardwood floor. “We were *soooo* worried. Andy kept diving in to find you.” Blood rushed to her face.

I looked to Andy for affirmation. Maybe he wanted to torture me into feeling like a bigger letdown because he nodded. He dropped down beside Sophie and poked her belly button. She punched his arm. I didn’t miss the lovesick, slack-jawed expression he gave her before turning his eyes back to me. “Sophie caught a ride home. I stuck around and waited for the cops.”

I recalled Andy racing off to rescue Sophie just before my life took its bizarre and troubling twist. Later—when she wasn’t around—I’d bug him about what happened. “My dad said they took you in. You’re in big trouble, aren’t you?” I paced the floor. Its creaking was the only sound in my room.

"Nah, they tried to make me take their alcohol test, but I said no. By time my parents came, nothing showed up," he said. Andy could haggle himself out of any situation—his dad's the best criminal attorney in Gloucester. "My folks weren't really mad, just scared for you."

A whooshing sigh of relief filtered from my lungs. "Good to know." I scrunched my face, recalling my own dilemma with the law. "I didn't blow anything either. But they got me for trespassing. Pretty screwed up, huh?"

"No way! You almost drowned," Sophie squealed. She rolled her eyes and hugged one of my pillows. "They let kids go all the time. What's their deal?"

Poke the girl who made them come out to BFE on a Friday night.

"Times up, Char!" Dad yelled.

"He's timing us?" Sophie asked. I nodded and she coughed. "Wait, you're grounded?" Reluctantly, I told her I was. She and Andy exchanged their "WTF" look—raised eyebrows and scrunched noses. I knew what they were thinking: *Cam drinks right under his nose, so why are* you *grounded?*

Maybe it was because Dad never caught my brother. Or because my family now believed I was just a tad suicidal.

"Guess he wants to see what happens in court. The fine is going to blow, though," I said. Suddenly, I smacked the palm of my hand against my forehead. "Shit! I lost my bag at the beach last night." My keys were in my bag along with tip money from Friday and Saturday. Two hundred dollars, to be exact, and that was made being a kiss-ass to Summer Kids and gossipmongers.

Andy rolled off my bed and went to the door. He cast a broad smile over his right shoulder. "In your kitchen."

I rushed toward him. Bouncing on my toes, I kissed his cheek. Scruffy facial hair irritated my lips. "Dude, I love you, but shave. Please?"

Andy and Sophie laughed. For the time being, their worries were gone. I wasn't so lucky. Doubt turned into anxiety because I still couldn't remember many details from the night before. Maybe I had amnesia from hitting my head on a rock. If that were the case, I wished I could forget arguing with Kyle and the music. That creepy song refused to stop stalking my brain.

"Call when your dad isn't freaking out," Andy said, breaking my thoughts. I gave him a thumbs up, but we all knew that my father's apprehension would last for the next few weeks at minimum.

I settled in to eat breakfast with Dad and Cam after my friends left. Know those families on TV who have meals together and share sunny details about their day? That isn't us—at least not since Mom died. I

watched them spoon down overcooked eggs and applesauce and listened to the clang of forks on plates. Hazelnut made my stomach lurch, so I pushed my coffee away and drank water.

"Rob called," Dad said.

Less than 24 hours ago, Rob had accused me of dabbling in drugs. Imagine his reaction to finding out about my escapade at The Lighthouse. There was a good chance he'd start giving me bi-weekly drug tests. I looked up from the grape-bordered placemat and cleared my throat. "He did?"

"He wants you to take the day off. Give him a call after school tomorrow to go over next week's schedule."

I twirled the spoon through my mug, watching as the non-dairy creamer turned my drink a rich gold. "Oh."

Coffee splashed from his "Greatest Dad" mug when he slammed it down. "But I'm not too sure if I should let you go back to work!" Stormy eyes narrowed, and he sucked in his cheeks.

"Dad—" Cam groaned. Snort. Was he actually concerned about my well-being or the fact Dad's roaring voice conflicted with his hangover migraine?

My father sopped up the spill with a wad of napkins. "It was awful, Char. Thinking you were dead. What's the matter with you? Summer school? Parties with cops? What next?"

A wilting slice of soggy toast in my plate became my new staring target. If I defended myself, my father would become more irritated. I poked at my food with the fork, and sighed. "Sorry." A lame response, but what else could I say to fix what was broken?

"Why's the door locked?" someone yelled from the garage. The only person who ever used that door was Cam's friend, Brian. Unlike regular school, college let out at the end of April. Brian had been a pest—one that was impossible to eliminate with a commercial-sized can of Raid—ever since he returned from NYU a month and a half ago.

When neither Dad nor I budged, Cam had no choice but get up and trek across the kitchen. Poor kid looked like he was in pain. Then again, he wasn't the one Dad was tearing into.

Brian was dressed for winter instead of the beginning of summer in his black long-sleeve shirt, heavy cargo pants, and knit skullcap. Maybe he spent the morning fishing. A getaway from Dad on the water seemed strangely appealing at this point.

"Morning, everyone," Brian said. He helped himself to the leftover food on the stove then squeezed into the chair against the wall. "How's it going, Char? Mr. Brewer?"

What kind of question was that? I was in trouble with the cops, and Dad was on the verge of hiding knives, ropes, and baby aspirin from

me. Brian couldn't expect my answer to be positive. "Peachy," I muttered, praying he wouldn't torture me with more questions.

I turned away as he shoveled cold eggs into his mouth—watching him eat made me queasy even when I wasn't shunning food. "How's work? D-bag being nice this summer?" Brian used to be a busboy at Romano's, but he and Rob went together like bleach and a bright red shirt. He only lasted a few months at the restaurant.

"Didn't I just say I was peachy?"

Dad cleared his throat. "I have to work, but I've asked them to pick up the Jeep. Why don't you rest while they're gone?" He didn't know how to handle grounding me properly—that was always Mom's way of correcting us. Asking Drunkard and Brian to pick up *my* car was his method of punishment without sentencing me to house arrest.

"Great." I slid back from the table, leaving my untouched plate behind. I lingered in the hallway in front of the photo of my JV volleyball team. Mom coached us, and in the picture, she sat in front of the team, holding the volleyball. I ran my fingers across her face—pale with a slightly crooked nose—and decided that Kyle was right about one thing: I looked like her.

"I bet you're disappointed, too."

I snorted, unsure of what response I expected to wheedle from the lifeless photo. God, I wish she would talk back, though. I needed her.

Dad and Cam needed her.

I slammed my bedroom door and heard Dad curse sharply. Not that I cared this time. I lay on the pink and blue braided carpet with my eyes glued to the window. Softly, I hummed the tune that brought me to my knees and made me forget so much.

CHAPTER FOUR

My dream wasn't about Mom or funerals or even dying and being sentenced to one hundred years of servitude at Romano's.

I dreamt about The Lighthouse.

Instead of parking my car, like I usually did, I drove all the way to the lofty stone structure. It entranced me. It also scared me, especially since I knew that the sea waited just beyond The Lighthouse. I stomped on the brake and the Jeep accelerated. Bile filled my throat as panic took over me. I jiggled the shifter knob, attempting to force it into reverse.

The car stopped then, the force causing my forehead to smack into the steering wheel. My dreams were so messed up that I knew better than to get my hopes up. The Jeep began to teeter. Back and forth. Down and up. Each time, the motion sharper, faster, until it was like the seesaw Cam and I used to play on in the backyard.

It's going to fall. I'm going to die because the car will fall, and I can't swim.

I wrapped my fingers tightly around the wheel as if I would be able to drive underwater. At last, the inevitable happened: the front of the car won its battle against the back. My Jeep crashed into the sea, the scene playing out like a clip in a horror movie—slow-motioned and heart pounding.

As I sank, I pressed my face against the window and scratched at the glass. Didn't take me long to discover I couldn't claw myself free. I slammed my foot on the gas, but the sea swallowed the car. Water from the Atlantic seeped through the windshield. Glass and liquid burst around me, and the music continued to play.

Only it wasn't the radio. The faceless voice was back, set on punishing me for evading it before. Its melody wrapped around me and was more suffocating than drowning. And then, Brian floated by. He motioned for me to come to him, but I shook my head. He shrugged and mouthed, "Your loss, Char." Grinning, he held up both arms and flashed devil horns. The sea dragged him down until he vanished.

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Sunlight hammered my eyelids and saved me from the pressure. I flipped over to shut the blinds, but instead of the mattress groaning beneath me, my cheek smooshed something gritty and damp. I opened my eyes and wheezed at what I saw. Water. Miles of it, to be exact. I turned in a slow circle and the rest of my surroundings staggered me.

I had slept behind someone's house.

Keeping a cautious eye on the house, I crept through the sand and

past three red and white beach chairs lined up beside one another. All I had to do was get to the road before the owners woke up to find me trespassing, drenched from head to toe in my lame smiley-face t-shirt and underwear. Then I would figure out where I was and go home.

Only made it to the side of the house before the sound of a door swinging open stopped me in my tracks.

"You were singing," said a male voice.

If I ran, he might chase me down and tackle me. Or worse, call the cops. I winced, imagining Officer Hale and Red slapping me in the forehead with another ticket. I spun around to see Golden Boy from Romano's, and my stomach and chest furled together. *Maybe he forgot me. Yeah, he hooked up with someone else last night and won't remember asking for my number.*

He squashed *that* dream as soon as he spoke. "Hey, I know you! You're that waitress, aren't you? Charrrr-liiiit?" He spoke my name slowly, drawing out each syllable. Sleepy eyes swept over my damp clothes. I tugged my shirt down to cover my underwear and fought the urge to tell him that although I waited tables, I was not a Hooters girl.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"You tell me. You're the one standing in my yard singing." He wiggled his eyebrows and added, "In a wet t-shirt. And no pants. What're you doing here?"

"You're dreaming."

Snorting, he shook his head. "Whatever. If I was, you'd be naked already."

Did he really just say that to me? I wanted my skin to crawl, but it didn't happen. "Sleepwalking," I hissed. That was possible, right? I just couldn't figure out what cruel twist of fate drew me into *his* backyard of all places.

He sauntered over and leaned against the house. "You're shitting me." I became painfully aware he wore nothing but striped boxers and a thin, Hanes white t-shirt. "Your singing woke me up. You're good," he said.

Maybe his radio serenaded him awake or MTV—if they still played music videos—but not *my* voice. I enrolled in choir freshman year for an easy grade. Not only did I receive a B, my teacher also asked me to sing very, very quietly. The extent of my vocal talent was staying on key while butchering *The Alphabet Song*. "I can't sing."

"Well, you were. Spanish or Italian, I think."

Why does he sound so convinced? "Hate to tell you this, but I barely passed Spanish with a C. Trust me, you didn't hear me."

His mouth moved, and even though his words were barely audible, I knew what he said. One of the perks of being a waitress is learning to read lips. He'd called me a liar. Before I had a chance to respond icily,

he cut me off. “Tried to call last night. The number you gave me doesn’t work. Didn’t think you’d show up at my house, though.” There was that annoying grin again. It revealed dimples I hadn’t noticed before. “In a wet t-shirt. Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

Did he have to reiterate my lack of clothing every 10 seconds?

I took a tentative step forward. “Where am I?”

“Changing the subject?”

“No . . . I really don‘t know where I am.” The concern in his blue eyes was a look I was accustomed to. Golden Boy thought I was batshit insane, and this time, I agreed. Normal people didn’t wake up in the sand wearing only panties. And normal people knew where they were when they woke up. After gnawing on his bottom lip for a moment, he shrugged and said, “Annisquam.”

Annisquam Beach was a ten-minute drive from my house. He rushed forward when I swayed and grabbed my bare upper arms to steady me. I jerked from his grasp, avoiding his stare so I wouldn’t have to see curiosity or mockery. *Don’t make fun of me, Golden Boy. Not today. Any other time but today.* “Can I use your phone? I need to call my brother to come get me.”

“I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

My eyes lifted to his face, and I swallowed hard, despite the scratchy burning in my throat. His blank expression was impossible to read. “Thanks.”

He nodded to the back door. “Just have to get my keys and put on some pants. Come on in.”

Convincing myself that I only followed because I was cold, I stepped into the house. We padded into a tiled laundry room the size of my bedroom, and better decorated, at that. My room didn’t have ornate sconces and teak cabinets. He fished a hoodie and sweatpants out of a woven hamper and tucked them in my hand. “They’re big, but clean. Bathroom’s next door.”

I backed out of the room—the last thing I wanted was to give Golden Boy an eyeful. After I dressed, I found him in a kitchen straight from the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens*, leaned over a granite center island. He spoke to a short, blonde woman. His mother. She settled on me, dressed in his baggy sweats, and blinked.

It looks like I spent the night with him. This can’t *be good.*

But she smiled, and held up an empty coffee mug. I shook my head to decline. Golden Boy cleared his throat and said, “Mom, this is, um, my friend. Charlotte.” He was cute when he stammered and blushed, and I had to admit, I found some sick pleasure in seeing it.

His mother maneuvered around the island and held out a hand. It was soft and smooth and smelled like cucumber lotion. She was a reincarnation of June Cleaver, minus pearls and pin curls cemented

with hairspray, but I bet my tips for a week she wore both when they hosted parties. “Nice to meet you, Charlotte. Wyatt didn’t tell me he invited a friend over for breakfast,” she said.

Wyatt. The name fit Golden Boy. I opened my mouth to speak, but he interrupted me. It was an aggravating talent of his. “Actually, Charlotte and I made plans to meet friends.”

Friends. Right . . . because I just love eating crêpes with Summer Kids.

She nodded and let go of my hand. I was glad she ended the excessively long handshake first. I’m not a touchy-feely person but I figured pulling back was rude. “Come to see us again, okay?” Her expression seemed so sincere that I could not possibly tell her I thought her son was a total asshat.

I tried to return the smile. “Yeah, sure.”

Under normal circumstances, my elbow would have connected with Golden Boy’s gut when his hand slipped to the small of my back. Today was different. I welcomed his touch and even found it soothing as he led me through their house. Mute, earthy tones and distressed furniture that was only available at antique auctions surrounded me. Once more, I thought of the decorating magazines at the grocery store checkout.

His family was loaded.

“Your dad’s in the Navy?” I asked as we passed a large portrait of a man in uniform hanging above the stone mantle.

He led me out the front door. “Coast Guard. And he just retired.” I felt a twinge of surprise when he opened the passenger door of the truck for me. The interior of the Dodge smelled leathery, and I swear the seats were the most comfortable I ever sat in.

The time, 8:09, popped up on the screen of his navigation system when he started the ignition. Great, school started in less than an hour. “Hate to rush, but can you drive fast?” The truck squealed in reverse down the sloped driveway. He stared at me, waiting for an explanation. “Summer school,” I huffed.

Wait! Was he laughing at me? He sounded like a quietly dying hyena as he tried not to choke on his piece of gum. “Sorry, just don’t see you as the summer school type.”

What *did* he see me as?

Telling him my life story was a waste of time for us both, so I shrugged. “Skipped a bunch of school this year, you know, drinking with my friends and stuff.” While the first part was true, I never missed class to party. Didn’t go because I couldn’t always handle the stares and the whispers about my mom.

“I shouldn’t laugh, but I have this picture of you drunk,” he said. To clue me in on his twisted image, he cocked a thick eyebrow.

“You’re foul.”

“Hey, you’re the sleepwalker. You do that often?” The attempt to sound nonchalant was unsuccessful because his voice cracked. He doubted my story as each minute passed.

How could I answer his question when I was unsure about what was going on? “A few times a year,” I said. He mumbled something about wanting to see more of my nightshirt collection, and I rolled my eyes and pointed to the next green street sign. “That’s it. Third house on the right.”

Our cozy, vinyl-sided house was at most half the size of his family’s garage, though he didn’t mention it. He cut the engine and turned to me, sliding his hand behind my headrest. “I don’t understand how you walked from here to my house.” He leaned in close to study my face. “But I’m glad you did.”

Blue eyes paused on my mouth. I squirmed. I smelled his cologne, one of those fresh scents the preppy boys practically bathe in—a subtle mixture of clean towels and salty air. Flinching, I raised my shoulders and hoped I seemed indifferent. Like sleepwalking was a usual occurrence. But my midnight journey across town was still messing with my head, too, and no explanation I considered made sense.

“Nothing’s impossible,” I whispered. *Here it goes—he’s going to tell me that I’m crazy.*

“Can I see you again?” He fumbled with the label on a half-empty water bottle in the drink holder. Maybe I was imagining it, but his face was flushed again. “Wearing clothes, if you want.”

Okay, maybe he wouldn’t call me a fruitcake, but his reasons for wanting to see me were clear. I shook my head in the negative. His eyes widened and I swore his mouth dropped. He shook his head, staring at the dashboard in silence. After a few moments, he asked, “Why?”

Do girls ever reject this kid?

Dad wandered out onto the front porch. I had prayed he would still be in bed, but I was a living, breathing number 13. He jabbed a finger at me then at the house. In other words: *Get your ass in here now!*
“Look, you seem” —I groped the doorknob—“great and all, but I’m not into dating right now.”

“Are you a lesbian?”

His question caught me off guard, whipping my head around. “No! Why do people always assume that when a girl says ‘no’? Maybe I just like being single.” And safe, I silently added. My longest relationship lasted just over eleven months because once Kyle started spreading gossip about sleeping with my mom, Eli decided we needed a break. Funny how his definition of a break meant not being able to look me in the eye or speak to me.

“That’s cool, I guess,” Golden Boy said. There was a bitter tingle in the spot just between my heart and throat. A tiny part of me wanted him to argue, to ask again.

“Thanks again for bringing me home.”

“Whatever.” Now he just seemed uninterested, like a classic Summer Boy. His indifference made it easy for me to pull the knob without any regrets.

I slammed the door behind me and didn’t bother to look back as I sulked up the driveway and past my father. “Got it, Dad. Grounded. Two more weeks.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Dad grilled me about Wyatt for fifteen minutes before he realized it was the first day of summer school. He made a bitter comment about how I shouldn't wear Golden Boy's clothes to school, and I hurried to my room to get dressed. I waited for Dad in the Jeep, dreading the short ride to school that would be full of uncomfortable questions and dark glares. He didn't show. Instead, Cam came outside, slipped into the driver's seat, and said, "Dad's tired. Don't know why you can't drive yourself."

"You wake up in douche mode, huh?" Pointing at his seatbelt, I added, "You should probably buckle up."

He grumbled but gripped the steering wheel between his knees and complied. "And, you're going too fast. Speed limit is 45," I complained. Sometimes I wondered if Cam did dangerous stuff just to get a rise out of me. He did a jerking off motion and mimicked my words. The speedometer of the P.O.S climbed from 55 to 75 in five seconds. God, he was an idiot. "Your stupidity hurts other people, you know."

He slowed to 50 miles per hour. "You're just scared I'll break this thing." He drove into the parking lot and skidded to a stop in front of the building. "Have a good day, little sister."

Snorting, I got out of the Jeep. "Why don't you get a job? Bedsores aren't exactly something you should be proud of. And fix your stupid car, I'm sick of sharing."

"Yeah, why don't you focus on trying to find the right classroom. Don't get lost in the bathroom."

Burn.

Summer school was for slackers and the girls who got knocked up in the middle of the year. Guess I fell under the slacker category. Mr. Sidney's classroom was on the second floor, and I ran upstairs, reacquainting myself with Gloucester High's scent of pine cleaner, to make it to trig on time. It was a waste of effort—the teacher wasn't there yet. I chose a desk in the middle of the room and sat down.

"Remember me, Goose?" a male voice asked, plunking down in the seat next to me.

Only one person called me that: Matthew Robbins. Freshman year, I tagged along with Cam to a party. Two shots of Grey Goose mixed with Red Bull made me puke, and when I did, Matt's Converse shoes caught the bulk of it. He'd laughed it off, but the nickname stuck.

I grinned at him. "Not really." Matt was supposed to graduate last month, but he disappeared after Christmas Break. Mono, according to the rumors. "Haven't seen you in a while, Robbins, but I hear that

shit's contagious."

"Think it can only be passed by kissing." If that was his way of drawing my eyes to his mouth, it worked. Matt stretched his long legs out and opened his notebook. He looks the same, I thought. Olive skin, messy ebony hair and brown eyes that were so dark, I usually thought they were black, too. "Surprised to see you here." He pulled his pen from his pocket and gave me a full view of the intricate tattoos decorating his forearms. Those were definitely new. Not that I ever paid much attention to his arms.

Only stalker fan girls did that.

"Chronic skipper," I said.

"Everyone out there"—he looked over his shoulder at the window —"expects the kid with the tattoos to be here, but not you."

"Looks are deceiving."

Mr. Sidney rushed into the classroom and started writing trigonometry notes on the dry erase board. Too bad he hadn't taken such a lax approach to roll call during the actual school year. I was good at trig—just bad at attendance—so I only scribbled down a few notes. "Forgot how genius you are, Goose," Matt said, tapping the inside of my wrist with his pen. I peeked at his notebook. One side of the paper was already full of neat, block handwriting.

"Turn to page 23 in your books and complete the first 30 problems," Mr. Sidney instructed. "Calculators are in the desk."

I reached far into my desk, feeling around for the calculator. Two of my fingers sliced across something sharp. I yanked them out. When other people bled, I wasn't fazed, but my own blood turned me into an epic crybaby. I wrapped my good hand around the injured fingers and squinted inside the desk to find the culprit.

A broken mirror. What kind of idiot leaves a shank in a school desk?

Matt scooted closer. "You okay?"

Why doesn't it hurt yet? Bet that mirror had some screwed up infection on it. Or drugs. God, if my fingers rot off, I swear I'll sue this school. I opened my fist and tried not to panic. No broken skin. No blood. *Nothing.* "It'll be fine." I hid my hands in my lap.

"Charlotte," Mr. Sidney warned. "School work then Mr. Robbins, please?" The other kids snickered.

I held up my closed hand. "I cut my finger, can I be excused?"

Mr. Sidney didn't look convinced, but he gestured to the door anyway. I bolted from my seat and out to the hallway. There was one other person in the bathroom, a Scene girl, and she glanced up from grooming her black, fuchsia, and platinum hair to give me a who-do-you-think-you're-staring-at look. After she left, I examined my fingers.

Flawless skin now, but three minutes ago, it was hacked. What happened? I rubbed my thumb across the spot the glass touched and

shuddered.

I thought about my fast-healing hand for the rest of class. *If that's even what it is. Maybe I imagined it. Maybe . . .* Yeah, maybe the cut was a figment of my imagination. But not the other stuff, like sleepwalking to Golden Boy's house.

A hand waved in front of my face. "Class is over," Matt said. "And you look out of it. Sure your fingers are good?" I jumped up and almost knocked my desk over. Nodding my head, I threw my books and pen into my bag and left the room. Matt was right behind me. He walked with me to the front doors and leaned against the brick wall separating the two. A rare, full smile lit up his face. I couldn't help but relax.

No wonder so many girls want him. Golden Boy has nothing on him.

Wow. Why had Wyatt entered my brain for even a nanosecond? He'd acted like such a jackass when I turned him down that I confused myself by thinking about him. I wanted to stay and talk to Matt, but I could see Dad waiting in front of the school. "My ride's here. Let me know if you want to get together to study for trig or something." It was a lame way to suggest hanging out, but he smiled again, and I was insanely pleased.

"Cameron is busy," Dad said once I climbed in his truck. "But I needed the time off."

We talked about school on the way home. I held my breath the entire time, terrified he'd suddenly bring up Wyatt, but it never happened. I told him I had a headache and skipped eating lunch together. I sat on the edge of my bed with my elbows on my knees and tried to come up with an explanation for the dream, the sleepwalking, and the illusions. Dad interrupted my thought process when he brought me the phone.

It was Rob. "Charlotte, can you work tonight? I'm short-staffed again." I wanted to chain myself to my bed in hopes I wouldn't do anything else weird or mortifying. But I also needed the money.

"Come in at three?"

"You got it," he said. His tone, cautious and high-pitched, assured me of an upcoming drug test.

Dad reached out to snatch the phone as soon as I ended the conversation. "Make sure you have Rob print your schedule. I don't want you out partying instead of working."

It was strange for my father to be so gung-ho about punishment, but I said, "I will." He didn't notice me wiggle the fingers I cut in front of my face. "Definitely crazy."

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The Tuesday crowd at Romano's was thin, consisting of old people who came in every weekday. They always tipped well and most

ordered the special—grilled salmon and vegetables—with black coffee. Rob cornered me for my drug test as soon as I came in the door.

Instead of sending me to the hospital to face the awkwardness of someone standing over me while I peed, he swabbed my mouth. “A new way to do it,” he explained, capping the cotton wand and stuffing it into a biohazard bag. “I just send this off to Boston and they get me the results in a week or two.”

“I feel like a Maury reject.”

“You know I hate doing this, Charlotte. I just want to ma—”

I held up a hand to cut him off. “—manage a tight ship. Got it, Rob, and seriously, I don’t mind. The test will be negative.”

“Good, just didn’t want you to quit.”

I felt slightly dejected as I left his office. Rob had a sickening talent of making me feel like a crackhead, even though I’d never touched drugs in my life. When I saw Golden Boy sitting in my section, though, I quickly decided that my embarrassment at being treated like a criminal was nothing compared to the frustration I experienced when he was around. With his polo shirt and khakis, he fit in with the old men hanging around the restaurant, except his teeth were real, and he lacked one of those awesome tweed golf hats they wore.

His eyes traveled down my body, pausing on each curve. *I’m not a piece of prime rib, Golden.* Why couldn’t he eat at any of the *other* Gloucester restaurants? Right off the top of my head, I could think of 10 within a mile that had better food and Google reviews than Romano’s . I stepped in front of his table, and the corners of his mouth tugged into a smile. His expression was so infectious that I almost wanted to smile back. I refused to give him that satisfaction. “What do you suggest?” he asked.

“Vegan, remember?”

“I do.”

“Then why ask?”

“Keeps you around longer.”

Wonder how long he worked on that *line.* Once again, I was underdressed next to him. I wore my faded Romano’s t-shirt that hugged my curves a little too much and the black, cotton work pants that shrunk during one of Cam’s laundry expeditions. “If you want my opinion, I’d go for the sprout salad with vinaigrette.”

He cringed and scanned the menu until he found the dish. “Sunflower seeds? Spicy tofu?” He looked up at me, shaking his head like he genuinely felt sorry for me. “One day, I’ll talk you into eating *real* food.”

One day? I didn’t like when Golden Boy referred to a future where we still came in contact. “I have other customers, you know,” I said.

"I'll take the grilled salmon, a side salad, and coffee."

Told you, he *definitely* fit in with the regulars. "Salmon it is," I said.

"How'd school go yesterday?" His question stopped me.

I turned to face him and shrugged. I wouldn't tell him how I hallucinated cutting my hand. "Stuff I already know."

He swiped a sugar packet from the dispenser, twisting it in his fingers. "Self-assured, huh?"

"Not entirely. And if you spill that, *you* clean it up."

"You never say anything nice, do you?"

"I thanked you for taking me home yesterday, didn't I?" And when I turned him down, the look on his face told me I would not see him for a while. So why the hell was he here and sucking the life out of my section with . . . Summer Boy *essence*?

Rob skidded over, eyes alert because I'd been at Golden Boy's table too long. My boss was probably nervous thinking about what I would say to Wyatt. "Is there a problem here?"

Wyatt flashed Rob a smile. "No sir."

"Fail," I whispered loud enough for my boss to hear. Rob stood frozen and slack-jawed as I slid past him. He came to fuss while I poured Wyatt's coffee. It was the usual lecture: *Be nice to customers! There's nothing wrong with rich kids. If you're bad, I might have to fire you.* You know, all the stuff your parents teach you when you're four.

Rob obviously never noticed the way Wyatt looked at me.

Golden Boy *had* to get tired of pursuing me, right? Frequent visits were bound to affect me eventually. When I took him his coffee, I attempted to get to know him. Sort of. "Why are you here?" I asked. Probably not the greatest approach, but it was better than telling him to piss off again.

He leaned forward on his elbows to examine me. There was a blobby ketchup stain on the hem of my t-shirt, and I hoped he didn't see it. "I like you."

"Whatever. You've known me for a total of three days. It takes me longer than that to decide if I like a pair of jeans," I said. My hands trembled as I cleaned off the table next to his because blue eyes followed my every move. The interest was creepy, and I had to admit, flattering.

My nerves calmed by the time I served his food. He pointed to the chair in front of him. "Wanna join?"

I made a face and shook my head so hard my ponytail holder fell out. He stiffened, likely due to my hair reeking of Flipper. "Do I need to stamp vegan on my forehead? I'll check on you in a bit."

Although my appetite was non-existent, my thirst was not. I found myself at the dispenser in the storeroom, drowning cups of water. Agua wasn't exactly my drink of choice--okay, I loathed drinking

water--but today, it soothed my dry throat and I couldn't get enough of it.

"What are you doing?" Rob asked. He stood in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest and a sour expression that made him look older than he was.

"My throat hurts."

He nodded to my right hand. "What's the salt for?"

"Salt?" I glanced down at the giant disposable shaker. *Where did I get this?* The container was completely empty, except for a few dashes at the bottom. "Um, it was empty, and I wanted to toss it out."

Why don't I remember picking this up?

Rob stuttered and rubbed his neck, then said, "Get back to work." He left the room, mumbling about how he hoped Boston would expedite the drug test results. I started to toss my cup in the trashcan but a swishing noise made me look into it. Salt coated the Styrofoam bottom. I rubbed my tongue over my teeth. They were gritty, but the taste was sweet, not bitter. Why the hell was I drinking salt water? And since when did salt taste like sugar?

I was afraid of ending up in an asylum, but more fearful of losing my job. I went back to work. Wyatt waited until he finished eating to bug me again—smart move on his part. "You ever going to give me the right number?"

"Probably not." I handed him his check, trying my best not to think about the salt. Had to admit, he was a good distraction. He handed me a debit card and slipped a ten-dollar bill under the ketchup bottle. His meal hadn't even cost that much. Maybe he was crazy, too, or believed money enticed me. Didn't he know my affection didn't have a price tag?

When I returned with his receipt, I said, "Besides, I don't know your last name."

He winked, stood to his feet, and whispered in my ear, "Anderson. Call me later if you want, Charlotte Brewer." His face lingered by my hair, then he inhaled.

Madness surrounded me.

I glared at the back of his white polo shirt, wondering if his mother ironed it for him. The nagging voice in my head told me that at least *he* had a mother. I despised that voice. It was only after I swiped my tip from the table that I noticed his number scribbled in sloppy, black ink across Alexander Hamilton's face.

***

I dragged into the house a few minutes after ten. My spoils for the night included 80 bucks in tips and a Snickers Bar, courtesy of the 12 year olds whose parents dropped them off for a double date. Cam brooded in the kitchen, over a bowl of chicken soup, and nodded a

terse greeting.

"What's wrong with you? Didn't get away with pulling your little stunt at Seaside tonight?" I asked. Seaside Liquors was a store right by Salem State. Cam would wait outside the store, patting his pockets and searching his car for his driver's license. Eventually, some poor, unsuspecting college girl would ask him what was wrong. He lied, she believed him, and five minutes later, he was always on his way home with booze.

Yeah, my brother was a total weasel.

"Brian's dead."

The plastic cup I plucked from the counter crushed under my grasp. "What?" I thought of my nightmare, and the kitchen spiraled around me, colliding into my still body. "How? *When*?"

Cam wrung his hands together, let out a harsh groan that didn't sound human, and lifted his eyes to mine. I flinched. Whenever he cried, I died a little. "Some kids found him. His mom called a little while ago."

My brother and I never hugged, but suddenly, my arms were around him. He sobbed into my hair. The scene felt like déjà vu.

Cam was the one who broke the news to me about our mom. I was working the afternoon the cops found her, and when he showed up at Romano's with red-rimmed eyes and disheveled hair, I knew she was gone. *"They found Mom this morning, Char. The car . . . her car . . . off the shore."*

Mom was dead long before the waves pulled her car down from a handful of OxyContin and a bottle of 151-proof liquor. Dad and Cam claimed she drowned. Saying that made them feel like her death really was an accident instead of suicide.

My brother curled up in a ball on the couch and went to sleep early. I sat with him, staring blankly at reality show reruns, and waited for Dad. Brian was dead. He'd always annoyed me, but I loved him. And losing him was almost like losing Cam. "Brian's gone." My entire face was numb when I said the words. I wanted to wake up and discover that the last few days were nothing but a vicious nightmare. "Brian's gone," I repeated.

The rustling of grocery bags interrupted my trance. Dad rested his back to the doorway and pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is shaping up to be another bad summer, kiddo," he said. He stared down at Cam and bit into his lower lip. "How's he doing?"

"He's . . . he'll be okay." I got up and grabbed my glass of water from the coffee table. Dad stopped me from brushing past him.

"How are *you*, Char?" he asked. Dad's voice was the best way to gauge his emotions. I didn't need to see his eyes to know he was worried about my reaction to Brian's death.

I didn't know how I felt. When Mom died, I kept a straight face for Dad and Cam. I waited until they were asleep, and I was alone in my bedroom, to cry. It was hard because during the first moments following her death, all I wanted to do was sob and lock myself in my room. Tonight, I couldn't conjure up a tear to save my life.

"I'll be okay, too," I said. I crept to my room and lay on my stomach. *Cry, dammit, cry!* Tears never came, and I wanted to know what the hell was the matter with me.

No normal person felt nothing after someone they'd known for seventeen years drowned. My sanity was becoming more questionable at each passing day. Had thinking about Mom made me heartless? This emptiness was new, something I never felt, even after her death. I splayed my fingers over my chest. Did I still *have* a heart?

I closed my eyes. Sleep always made everything better, and if I was lucky, I'd have eight hours without creepy dreams and even freakier wakeup calls. I rolled onto my stomach, buried my cheek into my pillow, and waited to knock out.

Something hit me then, but it definitely wasn't sleep. I bumped my lamp and alarm clock off my desk when I jumped to my feet. Standing in front of my mirror, I pressed both hands to my chest.

And counted.

"I must be doing it wrong," I hissed at my reflection. I fumbled through the items on my dresser. One of the buttons on my phone sailed across the room and landed by the vent when I began jamming the keys, but a broken Nokia was the last thing on my mind. I set the stopwatch and felt my heartbeat again.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven.

I counted over and over again, until I was numb. I crawled back into bed and hugged myself tight. "This is another dream," I said. But I knew it wasn't. I lay shivering in the dark, and my brain processed my discovery.

My heart beat seven times a minute.

CHAPTER SIX

Brian's funeral was three days later, on Friday afternoon. His parents asked Cam to be a pallbearer. Dad even took time off from the hospital to attend the service.

And I didn't go.

It was a low move on my part, but honestly, the chilly funeral home terrified me. Mahogany caskets encircled with bunches of flowers reminded me of Mom. Just thinking about funerals burned the sickening odor of snapdragons and roses into my nostrils. Cam was pissed at me. He ignored me at dinner on Thursday night and made a point to hog up the bathroom Friday morning. Dad told me that even though he couldn't make me go, he was disappointed with my decision not to.

I also refused to sleep. Another early morning encounter with Wyatt sans pants was a major no-no, so I stayed awake, staring at my ceiling or trying to concentrate on the stack of summer reading material for AP English. Thankfully, I didn't have to rely much on glowing plastic stars and F. Scott Fitzgerald—my unnatural heartbeat was enough to keep me up all night. I debated going to the hospital, but in the end, decided not to take the risk. Didn't want to become some medical team's dream experiment.

"You aren't going to Brian Cushman's funeral?"

The million dollar question. Call me naïve, but I didn't expect to hear it from anyone other than my family. I picked at my holey jeans so I would not have to meet Matt's expectant gaze. "I like to remember him like he was." The way he looked in my kitchen the morning he and Cam picked up my Jeep. Not the boy from my nightmare.

"Me too."

That's right. He and Brian were friends. Somehow, I forgot that he used to party with Cam and Brian. He gave me a grim smile, then turned his attention to his cell phone. Everyone at Romano's and even strangers at the grocery store asked how Cam was holding up. Matt didn't, and I was glad. My brother had issues with death and his best friend died. Obviously, he was suffering.

"Almost a quarter after nine," Matt said. My eyes darted to the circular clock at the front of the classroom. 9:13, and so far, no teacher and very few classmates. "We can miss up to two of these, Goose. Paintball?"

Skipping class was the reason I was in summer school in the first place, but his suggestion was too enticing to pass up. *Maybe a little fun is what I need to take my mind off everything.* Plus, paintball involved

shooting stuff. What better way to deal with a screwed up heartbeat, a salt fetish, and guilt over not attending a friend's funeral?

So, maybe paintball wasn't enough release therapy, but at least it was a start.

We waited for Mr. Sidney for five more minutes then left for the paintball field in Rockport. I insisted on paying the $35 for his mask and marker. It was my gift to him for ruining his shoes two years ago. I told him that, as I slipped my mask over my head, and he laughed. "God, Goose, you look like Darth Vader."

"Nerd," I teased, taking a few steps back. I pulled the trigger on the marker and pretended to be shocked when red paint splattered on the front of his t-shirt. "Oops!" I didn't have a chance to react before he fired at me. Twice. Royal blue paint stained each of my knees.

"You know, if Darth Vader was drenched in paint and singing a song of defeat."

He was surprised at how good I was, but by the time we decided to call our game quits an hour and a half later, I looked like Smurfette and Lurch's love child.

"I hit you at best"—I counted the red splotches on his clothes—"ten times." Still, I laughed.

"Weak with the force young Goose is."

Another *Star Wars* reference. Only Matt could make nerdy stuff seem semi-normal and hot. "Whatever, Robbins, see you at school. Ease off the peer pressure from now on, though. My dad'll go ballistic if I flunk summer school."

He gave me a cheesy thumbs up and started to leave. Hesitantly, he turned back to me. Serious expressions were never a good thing. I flinched and waited to hear what he had to say. "Your mom was my favorite teacher. It's a shame abou—"

I shook my head so he would shut up. Sometimes, digesting words of kindness was more difficult than hearing accusations. "Thanks."

"I don't think she did what Kyle said. Never have." He walked to his car, a beat up Camaro, and waved goodbye to me.

Whenever someone mentioned Kyle Sanford, my mood quickly went to crap. Kyle lied about my mother, harassed me, but was still a victim. Pretty sad, if you ask me. On the drive to Gloucester I failed to shake off thoughts of drowned bodies, funeral homes, and Kyle.

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The sun set well before I arrived home. I'd stopped by Mom's grave and lost track of time. Someone had put a bouquet of white tulips on it recently, and I would be fibbing big time if I didn't admit I was dying to know who. Dad always took her colorful daisies. Before someone started stealing them, I used to leave notes.

A yellow sports car sat beside Dad's truck in our driveway. He and

Cam raved about vehicles so much that I recognized the car as a Shelby Mustang. Expensive and fast as a rocket. Dad lounged on the couch in the garage, watching the news in the dark. One good thing came from my run-in with the cops at The Lighthouse: he worked less to keep an eye on me.

"How was school?" he asked as I hurried past the door.

"Good," I yelled. "Got to put my books up, be back in a few."

Noisy laughter came from the kitchen. I considered turning around because I was covered in paint and one of the voice's belonged to Cam. Too bad I had to go through the kitchen to get to my bedroom. Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the room. My brother sat at the table with a blonde girl who looked as if she stepped out of a Mattel package. I poured myself a cup of water before I acknowledged them.

"Hi," I said.

Cam flapped his hand at me then smoothed a short, brown cowlick. "Lorelei, this is my sister Charlotte." She got up to shake my hand. Know those mega tall, willowy models on reality TV modeling shows? She looked like one. Lace-up sandals, strapless yellow dress, and aviator sunglasses completed her Barbie meets America's Next Top Model look. In our kitchen, with its peeling linoleum and bucket of paint sitting in the corner from the cabinet project Dad never finished, Lorelei was out of place.

"It's lovely to meet you, Charlotte," she said in a soft, almost melodic voice.

"Um . . . thanks?" What normal person used the word 'lovely'? Cam glared at me. "I mean, nice to meet you, Lorelei."

She laughed—a light, tinkling noise that filled the room. It weirded me out when the girls Cam brought home giggled sporadically at nothing. Why was she here anyway? He *never* wanted anyone around while he moped. "So, did you know Brian?" I asked, leaning against the stove.

She shook her head. "No, but I'm sorry I didn't."

"We met fishing," Cam said.

She smiled and nodded. I'd never seen teeth that were as white as hers. "This afternoon."

Cam fished when he was depressed—it helped him clear his mind. "Good for the soul," he always said. I was just surprised he met someone while he was out. Since he shared my curse of squinting when he lies, I knew there was more to their meeting.

"We're going out for coffee. Want us to bring you something back?" he asked.

"I have plans."

Dad poked his head in the kitchen. "You're grounded, Charlotte." Of course he'd mention my punishment in front of a stranger. Instead of

scuttling away to soak up more CNN, he came in and grabbed a soda from the pantry. “And I see you don’t take it seriously. Rockport for paintball?”

“Class project,” I said. *Please, please, please don‘t mention me skipping out on Brian‘s funeral.*

“Look, Char, go out, but” *—there’s always that evil “but”, isn’t there?* — “you better be back by 11.”

I was certain that his change of heart about my punishment was due to Cam’s new . . . friend. The fact she was here was out of character for my brother, but I wasn’t going to complain. He wasn’t cloistered away in his room, grieving alone, and Dad was letting me off the hook for the night. I speed-walked toward the hallway before my dad could change his mind.

“And no Jeep,” he called after me.

Where did he expect me to go without a car? He cleared his throat, and I knew exactly why he was doing it. Clenching my fists, I turned to face our guest. “Great meeting you.”

“You too, Charlotte, and I hope we’ll speak again soon.” Creepy much? Her sing-song voice made me uneasy, and I rushed to my room.

I sent Sophie a text message asking if she wanted to go bowling. Five minutes later, she responded. She and Andy were at the movies. She promised to pick me up after it ended in two and a half hours. Know those nerd-magnet epic movies? Yep, Sophie’s into them (I swear she watches the Lord of the Rings trilogy once a week) and lucky for her, Andy was loyal enough to sit through three hours of goblin nooky and intergalactic warfare.

I couldn’t wait that long. Dad would hound me about watching the news with him until I left with *someone*. I sifted through the wad of tip money in my nightstand drawer and pulled out the balled up ten dollar bill. I was a sellout, but I figured Golden Boy couldn’t be all bad since I liked the band on his caller-tune.

“Hello?”

“It’s Charlotte.”

“Charrrr-liiiit,” he drawled. “You missed me, huh?”

My finger automatically hovered over the button to hang up on him. *Go fug yourself, Wyatt.* Gripping the phone tightly, I smiled so I could mask some of my sarcasm. “Want to do something tonight?”

“I thought we were taking it slow.” God, there was that suggestive tone again that made me squirm. “But, I guess since I’ve seen your smiley face panties . . . I’ll see you in 20 minutes.”

Like an idiot, I waited for him at the end of our drive, fidgeting with the bent flag on our mailbox. I should have fretted over my heartbeat. Or telling my doctor about my lack of appetite and new saltwater

fetish. Instead, I was anxious about seeing Golden Boy.

He pulled by the curb and stepped out of his truck, smiling. His walk was far too confident. “You realize I have your number now, and it’s not the one you gave me before.”

I scratched my head and took a step back. “Yeah, changed numbers __”

“Your bullshit is cute,” he said. He opened the passenger door. I nodded my gratitude, slipping onto the leather seat. The interior lights gave me a decent look at him when he sat down. He wore a salmon-colored button up shirt—the kind Abercrombie and Fitch sells—and cargo shorts. Usually, I laughed at a Summer Boy in a pink shirt, but the look fit Wyatt.

“You look amazing.”

Amazing took on an entirely different meaning in Golden Boy’s language. The jeans and t-shirt I pulled from the dryer were average and wrinkled. I’d styled my hair in a messy knot on top of my head and blue paint chips were bound to be on random parts of my body.

It was already half past nine, so we went to his house to relax on the beach. “What made you call?” He fixed piercing eyes on me. I leaned back on my elbows and tilted my face up to his.

“Didn’t you ask me to? I mean, writing your number on my tip was just a little obvious *and* desperate, don’t you think?”

“Desperate or not, you still called.”

You are much too secure with your effect on me, Golden. “This isn’t a date,” I pointed out. He slid a fraction nearer to me and sucked in a breath of air. Was he sniffing me again? “And if it was, I’d be leaving now because that’s strange.”

“You smell like the ocean.”

A normal guy would tell a girl she smelled like Chanel perfume or even gummy bears. I whiffed my wrist but only caught the faint odor of strawberry soap. He grabbed my hand and stopped me from getting up. “Really, you do, and I‘m not saying that to hurt your feelings. You remind me of surfing.”

I crossed my legs, facing him. “You surf?”

“Mm hmm. If you count the summer I spent with my gran in California.” He entwined his fingers with mine. “Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

I hoped that wherever we were going, he wasn’t planning to take advantage of me because I did not know how to respond to him. Besides, I didn’t want to have to take his ass down. He stopped at the gated entrance of The Lighthouse. I jabbed my finger at the **PRIVATE PROPERTY** sign attached to the wrought iron. “This is trespassing.” Two police citations in less than 7 days would be my undoing.

He looked down, but I saw his cheeks move into a smile. “Whatever.

You're not afraid of a little trouble." He gripped my hips and hoisted me over. We sat on the hill overlooking the waves and rocks. The moon's dim glow cast a shimmering finish over the water, and shadows of waves danced across his face. "It's beautiful," I whispered.

"So, Vegan Girl, what do you like to do? Aside from party and hang out in my backyard half-naked?"

Locking my fingers together, I stretched my arms above my head. "Read, work, school for now." He reached out and pulled on my ponytail holder. My hair tumbled down my back and around my shoulders in a moist curtain.

He flashed me a lopsided grin. "I like you better like this."

I'll like you *better if I punch you in the mouth.*

We sat with a few inches between us, talking about his family. At seventeen, he was the youngest of three children—his twin sister was seven minutes older. He grew up at a Coast Guard base in Louisiana. After I commented on his drawl, he laughed. I frowned once he revealed they lived in Boston for the past three years. "Why would you want to be here instead?"

"Change of scenery for my folks, I guess."

"Oh wow, 45 minutes? Some change," I said.

"You hate it here, don't you?"

It was time to go. Chewing my bottom lip, I stood up and toyed with my back pockets. He pushed himself to his feet and curled his fingers around my arms. I looked down at the ocean. I preferred its unpredictability to his. "I never said that."

"But *do* you?"

I thought of Mom, everything that happened last year, and knew a major part of me truly despised Gloucester. My response was bitter and painful. "Why do you care?"

One of his hands cupped my chin. Our eyes touched—I didn't like his all that much tonight. They were too nosy. He touched my temple with his other hand when I tried to tug away. "Please don't."

Please don't look at me like that. Please stop making me want to tell you things you don't need to know. "My curfew is 11, we better get going."

Two things happened then: he leaned in to kiss me, lowering his eyelids. My internal panic alarm immediately went off; I darted out of the way. I expected him to straighten, glare at me, then flounce back to his family's McMansion, but that didn't happen. Instead, he lost his balance. I reached out to grab his shoulder, and my fingertips grazed the soft cotton fabric on the back of his shirt.

Frozen, I watched as he fell over the edge into the water. He didn't have a chance against the current and went under.

"Help me, Charlotte," he whispered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wyatt's voice, and others I could not identify, called out to me from the sea. My body became numb and heavy. The sensation was 100 times worse than my foot or hand falling asleep. *"Charlotte, help me. Please."*

"I don't know how!" I cried. I really didn't. My fear of the ocean was about as useful as the zero reception bars on my phone. Not like my wimpy declaration would benefit me, either. The voices lured me to the sea, and I was centimeters away from falling in. My whole body ached, as if thousands of sharp knives cut me at once. I sank to my knees, wheezing and digging my fingernails into the rocks. Struggling was unbearable. I gave up control, and as I tumbled after Wyatt, the pain stopped.

Seawater slammed into my face. I flailed and kicked, deciding that it would be better to fight the current rather than be its slave again. Drowning felt wrong this time. Funny to say that, but it was definitely off. Too calm. No pressure.

"Open your eyes," the voices whispered.

For once, I listened.

No burning. Last time, I wanted to claw my eyes out of my head, but my vision was clear, like I was standing on the surface. I stopped holding my breath to gasp, and nothing happened. I was floating and breathing underwater.

Trippy.

Wyatt's slack body descended into murkier depths. Snatching his hand, I drew him to me. *"Get me out of here*." His lips didn't move, and his skin, usually dark from time spent worshiping the sun, was a colorless gray. If I couldn't hear his feeble heartbeat, I would have believed he was already gone.

My arms locked around his waist. Recoiling was probably a better option, though. He was *talking* to me underwater. While unconscious.

"I'm ready," someone else said.

Water came together in front of me to form a tall, skinny man. He looked like a normal person. You know, if normal people were made solely of water. When I tried to maneuver around, he hovered in front of me, arms outstretched. *"I'm ready,"* he repeated. Witnessing him wave his hands around like a cheerleader on caffeine pills was both comical and startling.

Twelve others formed behind him—four men, three women, and five kids.

"He'll die. You guys can wait," I said mechanically. *What does that even mean?* Apparently, they understood because all thirteen nodded

then disappeared.

My illusions had taken on a whole new level of bizarre.

Wyatt's lips and fingers were dull blue when we broke free to the surface. I pulled him into the sand, climbed on top of him, one leg on either side of his waist, and tried to remember how to do CPR. I lowered my mouth to his and exhaled long breaths.

That CPR class I skipped out on would be helpful right about now.

I kept blowing against his lips, hoping he would come to. His face remained motionless.

Oh God, I've killed him.

But then his chest heaved, and he coughed. I tried to push away to let him take those first wonderful breaths. He crushed me to him, moved his lips beneath mine, breathed soft air against the corner of my mouth. Urgent fingertips buried into my skin and massaged small circles by my hair. I kissed him back, promising myself I only did it because he almost died. He was warm and soft and, luckily, alive. When I eased away, his pale lips lifted in a grim smile. "I've died," he whispered, closing his eyes.

"Not funny at all." I stood and paced in front of his feet. I kept my eyes glued to him. His breathing came out in choppy gasps that shook his chest.

"You saved me."

"I—" But I couldn't figure out what to say. I could swim now. He had talked to me underwater. And somehow, I'd discovered a colony of "water people."

I was nuts.

Absolutely insane.

But he was alive; that was enough to encourage me to question my sanity at a later time. He struggled to sit up. I knelt and pushed him back down. "Don't you dare move, I'm going to get help," I said.

He shot straight up and shook his head. Wincing, he clutched at either side of his forehead. "Don't. Remember that sign on the gate? My dad would shit a brick if I got into trouble."

I offered him my hand. When our skin touched, he convulsed and looked as if he might throw up. He leaned against me as we walked to his house. "Do you want me to call someone to come get me?"

"I'm not a baby. I picked you up, I'll take you home."

We trudged along in silence, and I noticed a muscle ticking in his cheek. Wyatt was a moody boy. *First*, he kissed me and now he ignored me. We reached his back deck. He slumped down on the steps, cupping his face with both hands. "You sure I don't need to get your parents?"

I already knew the answer. Wyatt Anderson was *too good* to ask for help. I sat next to him, running my hand over his knee. He accepted

my closeness at first but after a couple minutes, he started to tremble violently. I moved away from him and pressed my back to the iron rail. He couldn't even stomach my touch. If I were him, I would be freaked out, too.

After a few minutes of inhaling deeply and mumbling to himself, he lifted his head. "Thanks . . . for whatever you did." He disappeared through the back door and returned with an armful of clothes and towels.

"We have to stop doing this, people will talk," I said, attempting to make him smile.

He did, but it didn't extend to his eyes. "Guess we do." I was dying to know what the tremor in his voice meant. Had he witnessed what I saw underwater? Coming right out and asking him would be too risky, even stupid. If he hadn't, he would only question my sanity. Judging by his hesitant expression, though, he was already doing that.

"Turn around," I ordered. I changed fast into the sweatshirt and gym shorts he'd shoved in my direction. He was fully dressed and staring at me when I faced him again. If he was ogling my body, he wasn't *that* freaked out.

"You look different," he said, as we walked to his truck. I fought the urge to check my appearance in the mirror. It would suck to find something else wrong with me, like fins or scales. We exchanged very few words on the ride to my house. He fidgeted with the sun visor, played with radio buttons—anything to avoid talking to me. But once we were in my driveway, he stared into my eyes. "What were the words you said to me on the beach?"

"What's that?"

"*Ezisa*. You kept chanting it." He blinked a few times. "At least, I thought you did."

I reached out to touch his temple; he flinched, muttering something jumbled. "You bumped your head. I don't know what *Ezisa* means." As soon as I said it, my insides turned to ice.

When the weird, foreign word rolled off my tongue, the translation was clear:

Live.

CHAPTER EIGHT

My dream was about Mr. Sidney, my trigonometry teacher. Gross, right?

He assembled with the thirteen "water people", and his body was liquid, too. One of the children, a girl who was no more than seven, placed her small, sheer hand in mine. Mr. Sidney stood on my other side, but I paid attention to the kid tapping impatiently on my hand. "What happened?" I asked.

"My step-mom said I was a mistake . . ."

A platform rose up from the depths of the sea. Everyone stepped onto it. At first, I thought the lift was made of glass, but when I knelt down to rub my palm across it, I realized that like everything else in my dreams, it was water. I tapped my foot on the center of the platform. It jolted, then zoomed down an illuminated and blinding path.

We stopped moving twenty feet above a whirlpool. Gold and crimson melded into each other, forming an incredible light show that made me blink. Like an underwater aurora borealis. The girl beside me tugged on my wrist and motioned for me to bend down. She cupped her hand over her mouth, and whispered. "*Thank you. The other girl couldn't take us because*" —she sighed tremulously, her lips frozen in place— "*she said we were your job now*."

The other girl? I started to ask her what she was talking about, but she and the other kids clasped hands and jumped off the platform into the vortex beneath us. The rest of the water people followed suit, except for Mr. Sidney. He faced me, giving me a shocking glimpse of my own reflection. I had the curse of never being able to tan, but my skin was as gold as the sea spiraling below us. Silver eyes stared back at me.

"*You want answers?*" my teacher asked, inching toward me. Of course I did. It wasn't every day the faculty of Gloucester High infiltrated my dreams. I nodded. "*Ask the one who made you.*" He let himself be pulled into the spinning array of colors, and I watched him disappear, utterly confused by his final words.

***

I wasn't shocked to wake up on the beach—strange seemed to define my life now—but I didn't expect to be so close to The Lighthouse or to see an enormous moving van parked in front of the adjoining cottage. Before I could sneak past the truck, I heard a familiar voice admonish a mover in a sweet tone.

"Be careful with that, please? It's extremely old," said Lorelei.

Oh no, not her. Anybody but *her*.

I stepped around the truck and bumped into her yellow convertible. Ugh, why would she park so close to the moving truck? Her eyes landed on me standing in wet pajamas and she scurried over. As if fully clothed morning swims were normal, she smiled. “Char, I’m so glad to see you again!” Half of her hair was pulled back, but it didn’t stop the wind from ruffling it. She looked angelic standing in the sunlight.

I lifted my hand and waved sheepishly. At least I wasn’t dressed in only underwear this time. “How’s it going?”

“Excellent, and you? Taking a stroll?”

Do I look like I’m taking a stroll*?* “Um, no. I mean, yes. I’m going home.” Maybe I’d walk to Golden Boy’s house. If I was lucky, he might drive me across town. I hadn’t talked to him in a couple days, so he probably had steel bars covering his windows to keep me, the freak, out. Asking him for help was still worth a try. Lorelei pursed her lips sympathetically and motioned to the keeper’s cottage. “I’ll grab my bag and take you.”

I had always wondered what the inside looked like, so when I gazed at my barren surroundings and a cold draft hit me, my disappointment was epic. The floors and walls were made of stone. Judging by the plethora of trash on the floor, the place was a squatter’s paradise. I expected it to look romantic, like the fairytales Mom read when I was a kid. Instead, it was filthy and depressing.

I turned in a slow circle. “It’s kind of . . . crappy.” Her face fell, and I added, “Sorry, just being honest.”

“It won’t look like this when I’m done with it! I’m restoring the place.”

“Where are your parents?” I blurted. *And where the hell would you get the money to restore this dump?*

Her eyes darted to the floor. “I’m emancipated.” She grabbed her oversized yellow leather bag from the mantle and slung it over her shoulder. “I should get you home. Cammy must be worried sick!”

Cammy? What exactly did he say to make her believe he cared about what happened to me? She hummed as we walked outside, and I could not resist mimicking her graceful, fluttery movements. Don’t think I mastered it because one of the movers, a boy who went to my school, snickered. He stifled his laughter when I gave him the finger.

The movers stared at her like lovesick idiots, but she paid them no mind. She opened a box. A moment later, a buttercup print towel flew in my direction. Lorelei was certainly obsessed with all things yellow.

It was hard to start a conversation with her while she drove. I focused my attention on the dashboard, trying to locate a speck of dust or dirt, but it was spotless. She asked me about summer school. I

responded politely. When she questioned me about what else was going on in my life, I evaded her and mentally counted my weird heartbeat. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven.*

She insisted on ushering me into the house, and we found my dad pacing the small living room. He scowled at me but smiled graciously at her. "Thank God! I've been worried sick!"

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Brewer, but Charlotte and I went for a morning jog," she said. The lie slipped out so easily and sounded so convincing, Dad's lame smile looked like it might break his face.

"I don't mind at all. I just wish Charlotte would have told me where she was going." He turned to me and said, "I'm glad you're making new friends, Char."

I wanted to tell Dad I would *never* take a run with Lorelei, but I kept my mouth closed. I flashed a fake smile—one that rivaled Dad's overpowering grin. "Going to my room now," I said. Cam stopped me in the hall. He placed his hands on my shoulders and shook me. Good thing I was use to his excitement episodes or I would have been dizzy.

"Lori's here? I heard her voice!"

"Talking to Dad," I muttered, pointing to the living room. "And don't run, you'll look more desperate." I caught my reflection in the hallway mirror. I looked like my normal, pale self. Dark gray eyes glared at me, not the silver ones from my dream. *That's why they're called dreams, stupid.* I tuned in to Cam and Lorelei's conversation just in time to hear him invite her to dinner. When she accepted, I almost vomited.

Damn sleepwalking.

***

Lorelei didn't touch her food, but even if I were ravenous, I would have gnawed off a finger first. Cam's steak was charred and the suspicious veggies in the tossed salad had been in the fridge for a few weeks. I sipped water, half-listening as they talked about her renovation plans. For someone I first dismissed as an airhead, she knew her stuff.

The front bell rang, and I catapulted from my seat to answer it. I hoped it was a door to door vacuum salesman. Agreeing to watch someone clean the living room for an hour would be the perfect solution to avoiding Lorelei. Sadly, the person standing on the front porch wasn't toting a cumbersome hybrid cleaning machine.

Wyatt wore his typical attire of cargo shorts and a polo shirt. I could smell him from where I stood. I bit my bottom lip but then quickly remembered that I hadn't heard from him since the incident at The Lighthouse. "What do you want?" I asked, rolling my eyes. The guy had a bad habit of showing up just when I thought I'd never see him again.

His smile was off. Tonight, it was an expression that bordered a nervous frown. Don't get me wrong, he looked good when he stared me down with self-assured eyes, but I immediately preferred humble Wyatt. He spiked his wet hair with long fingers. "Wanted to see what you're doing tonight."

"And you couldn't call to ask me that?" I opened the door wide and motioned for him to come in.

He slid down on the recliner by the door. "Thought you might be too mad to answer." I crossed my arms over my chest, and he flushed. "Cute house."

"Cute?" I sat across from him at the piano bench, tucked one leg under me, and slumped against the keys. They made a hideous creaking noise. "Not everyone lives in a McMansion."

He grinned, and I was disappointed to see the vulnerability disappear. "At least I know you're not pissed," he said. I started to tell him he did not know a thing about me, but Cam and Lorelei wandered into the living room.

"What's up, man?" Cam said. My brother will strike up conversation with anything that nods and mumbles 'm'kay' every few seconds, so I wasn't surprised when he and Wyatt did some idiot guy handshake and introduced themselves.

Wyatt peeked past Cam at Lorelei. Since men acted like belligerent apes when she was around, he was bound to fall for her. "I'm Lori, a friend of the family," she said. Great, she was already referring to herself as a family friend.

Before I know it, she'll call me "bestie" and invite me over to her shack for spa night.

I inspected the sole of my tennis shoe. "If you want to go out, we better do it now before my dad comes home from work." Golden Boy shook his head, and my brother grinned at the prospect of having the house to himself and Lorelei.

The last time I went to St. Peter's Fiesta was the summer after ninth grade, but when I was younger, my family never missed it. Multicolored lights and streamers decorated downtown and all around us, the crowd munched on shrimp kabobs and waved Italian flags. "Doesn't exactly look vegan friendly," I joked as we ducked under a low hanging string of lights.

"I'll get you a wheatgrass smoothie."

I laughed. "That sounds gross."

Wyatt motioned for me to sit down in a free spot in the grass, and after I did, I faced him, hugging my knees. "You've come here before?"

"With my mom."

"Oh, she busy this year?"

Coming right out and saying Mom killed herself last year would just be weird, not to mention an instant conversation fail. I opted for the watered-down explanation of her death. “She drowned last summer.”

His face changed colors. “I’m so sorry!” It wasn’t like I’d been warm and sharing with him, so I shrugged.

“Don’t be, you didn’t know.” I said.

“Goose!”

We looked up to see Matt walking toward us with a petite mixed girl. I knew almost everyone at Gloucester High, but I had never seen her. With her delicate features and shoulder-length, curly hair that even I was envious of, she was too gorgeous not to notice. She chewed on a purple coffee stirrer that matched her nails.

“Goose?” Golden Boy asked.

I smiled up at them. “Not doing homework tonight, Robbins?”

“Didn’t you hear? Sidney died yesterday. School’s trying to get Dalton to replace him, but until then, no trig.”

Mr. Sidney was dead. If everything was normal, and I learned that the person who’d creeped me out in my dream was dead, I wouldn’t freak out. But nothing was regular anymore. Though I hated to admit it, some part of me had already known Sidney was gone. I’d known it the moment he appeared in my nightmare. I began to tremble. “How’d he die?” I wheezed. Wyatt’s hand automatically found my knee, and tingles raced from my legs to my toes and back up again.

“He had a heart attack boating with his kid.”

Just stay calm. Just. Stay. Calm. “Th-that’s horrible for his family.” My voice cracked. Matt nodded in agreement. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Wyatt’s face was drawn. “Matt, this is my, um . . . this is Wyatt.”

Matt acknowledged Wyatt by raising his chin, and Golden Boy’s response was just as robotic and cold. Matt gestured to the girl standing next to him. “This is Eva.” She thinned bow-shaped lips into a smile then resumed chewing on the stirrer.

She linked her arm in his, glanced up, and gave him one of those looks that would probably screw with any guy’s mind. “We have that thing to do, Matt,” she said. I felt hideous for flirting with him so blatantly a few days ago. Plus, I didn’t exactly seem saintly since I went to the paintball field with him and was now at a festival with Wyatt.

“Right, that thing.” Matt saluted me. “Catch you around, Goose.”

Wyatt cleared his throat to get my attention. He looked pale now. “Why does he call you Goose?”

I eased his hand off me and laughed. “I threw up vodka on his feet a few years back.” The festival fireworks started, and I flipped over on my stomach, pretending to watch. Matt’s words about Mr. Sidney

haunted me. Made me wonder who else from my dreams was dead?

When Wyatt took me home, Lorelei's car was still in our driveway. He laughed. "What so funny?" I pressed my backside against the front door.

"Your face. You don't like her, do you?"

I didn't know *what* to think of Lorelei. Part of me wanted to dislike her, especially when she called my brother 'Cammy' and giggled and treated me like we were long lost friends. But the other part was thankful she covered for me and lied to my dad.

"She's alright, I guess."

"You squint when you lie."

I pursed my lips, surprised he caught on so fast to my mannerisms. "Stop trying to learn me, Golden Boy."

"Can't help it when you're so fun to study. Come to my family's barbecue this Friday night."

So fun to study? I wondered how long he'd waited to use that line. I ran the tip of my tongue over my teeth so I wouldn't smile. "Maybe," I said.

"It'll be our third date."

I pulled my lip between my teeth trying to decide whether or not to kiss him. "We've *never* been on a date." But for someone I'd never officially gone out with, Wyatt Anderson was affecting me. Maybe it was the way he looked at me, a mixture of need and admiration. Or the way he said my name. Whatever it was, the attraction was strong and unavoidable. I pulled his head down to mine. The kiss was soft, not rushed like the one on the beach, and I took the lead this time. His hand pressed into the small of my back, pulling our bodies close together.

A slow smile eased across his mouth after he drew away. "Not a date, huh? What was that?"

"Trial run. See you later," I said. His mouth hung open. As I shut the door in his face, he asked what a 'Golden Boy' was.

Cam was on the couch and Lorelei played the piano. The keys always screeched under my fingers, but she somehow managed to make the out-of-tune instrument sound new. Both of their heads popped up as I stomped across the floor. She never stopped playing.

"I'm home," I huffed.

Cam nodded. His face appeared void of emotion, as if he was in a trance. What was with him lately? My brother's dazed mode worried me more than his emo alcoholic one. For a moment, I wondered if she had slipped something into his drink. I stared at her accusingly.

Her green eyes locked on me, and she mouthed, "No." The sonata she played suddenly changed. Something sinister and familiar leaked from the old piano. She began to sing.

The realization that she was the person I heard at the beach, at Romano's, knocked me backwards, and she quit playing when I stumbled. Cam's hands grabbed my shoulders. He led me to the recliner. "Are you okay?" he demanded, shaking me.

I banged my forehead against my knees. She was deliberately trying to mess with my head, I was sure of it. Then again, maybe I was imagining it all. That had to be it. Lorelei's song, Mr. Sidney and Brian's deaths, even tonight's "trial run" with Wyatt was a twisted figment of my imagination. Cam said my name a few more times, but I didn't answer. I only looked up after I heard the beep of cordless phone buttons. "I'm calling Da—"

"No!" Lorelei and I spoke in unison. She stood behind my brother grasping a glass of water. "I'm sure she just needs a drink." She pushed the glass into my palm, took a few steps back, and watched me carefully. As soon as the water hit my tongue, I tasted the sweetness. *Salt.* Cam stood over me with a puzzled expression.

Behind him, Lorelei pressed one finger to her lips.

CHAPTER NINE

My eyes were stuck to the computer screen for so long that the Google logo began to look like "Goggle." Rocking back in the chair, I wiped a smudge off the right corner of the glass to look at the time. Eight minutes after 11--nearly an hour had passed since I sat down. "You're a wimp, Brewer," I hissed, typing in what I needed to look up for the fiftieth time. It was impossible not to punk out when my sanity was at stake. Despite my shaky hands, this time, I worked up the nerve to hit enter.

My answer was the third result on the page.

"Stepmother arrested after death of 8-year-old girl." I scrolled down until I came to a picture and choked on my water. The girl had chin-length, chestnut hair, green eyes, and a dimple in her left cheek. Even though the kid in the picture was freckled and tanned instead of one shade away from transparent, I knew she was the girl I spoke to in my nightmare.

The stepmother of 8-year-old Mia Dunn was arrested today on suspicion of causing her death. Beverly Dunn, 24, of Virginia Beach was arrested this morning for the murder of her stepdaughter, Mia. The body of Mia Dunn, who has been missing since early June, was found last Friday in the Chesapeake Bay.

Reading about little kids passing away always ruined my day, but tonight it made me physically sick. I tossed back the rest of my water. Mia Dunn's unforgettable words pounded in my head: *"My step-mom said I was a mistake."*

Why had a girl I'd never met, never even heard of up until now, showed up in my dream. My fingers were heavy and mechanical as I searched for more people who had died recently. No surprise that I recognized the pictures attached to four news stories within the past two weeks. Murder, drunk drowning, boating accidents . . . what the hell was I? The Water Ghost Whisperer?

"Of course I'm not," I said. "I'm imagining this."

My imagination was getting just a tad too scary for my taste.

I erased the search history, shut off the computer, and tiptoed toward my bedroom. "You're up late." Dad's voice made me jump. I turned to face him. Didn't he know that it was cruel to startle someone in the dark? He squinted and pressed his lips together. "And you look like you've been up to no good. Were you sneaking out?"

Pointing to my doorknob, I said, "If I were, why would I be going to my room dressed in pajamas?" I opened the door and slunk into my room. He crossed his arms over his chest. My dad hated when I responded to his questions with indirect answers, and I knew he

wanted me to look him in the eye and tell the truth. “I wasn’t sneaking out, Brewer. I had research to do. You know, trying to be a good student and all.”

Satisfied with what I said, he smiled and nodded. “Love you, kiddo.”

“You too.” I started to shut my door, but the lack of television volume coming from the garage stopped me. “Hey, where’s Cam?”

I already knew my brother was with *her* before my dad spoke, but hearing it aloud just intensified my fears. “Out with Lorelei.”

***

Andy stuffed a ketchup-drenched fry into his mouth and pointed to his plate for the umpteenth time. For the umpteenth time, I shook my head in protest. His ploy to force fries on me was getting old pretty fast. He sat across the table from me at Sunshine Café, a dive on the waterfront, with a smorgasbord of food. My side of the table looked stark in comparison. “You on a diet?”

I ran my fingers around the rim of my transparent plastic cup. “No, just not hungry.”

“Are you sick?”

I hadn’t slept. I’d given myself a pep-talk last night about trying like hell to ignore the weirdness around me. It wasn’t enough to stop my fretting. No normal person could fall fast asleep after finding the obituaries of people they’d dreamed about, and even I wasn’t the exception to normal. Still, Sleeplessness was becoming a habit that made me a fragile, greasy looking thing. My gray eyes were too big for my face, like the glassy ones on those creepy dolls.

Our waitress bounced to the table. Nicola went to school with us, but whenever she saw me, she pretended like we’d never met. Freshman and sophomore year, though, we were on the same volleyball team.

Freshman and sophomore year, we were friends.

“Need anything else, Andrew?” she asked in a breathless whisper. I wanted to tell her that he hated being called by his full name, but his ridiculous grin would make it a moot point. Andy was putty around pretty girls.

I cleared my throat and slipped my drink across the table. “More water, please?” She plunked the cup on her tray then simpered at him. I rolled my eyes. He kicked my shin.

“What classes are you taking next year?”

He shrugged and dabbed at his mouth with a thick napkin. I hadn’t warned him about the mustard smearing his cheek. Maybe he’d repulse her and she’d leave us alone for the next twenty minutes. “Not sure, but I’m thinking about doing half-a-days,” he said. Andy already had enough credits to graduate. I was envious that he would be able

to legally skip out early once school began.

She brought pink and black fingernails to her lips and giggled before heading toward the kitchen. Realizing that I was still at the table, he turned his grin on me. “What?”

I balled up my straw paper, stretched it out, and then tied it into a knot. “You are a whore, *Andrew*.”

He groaned and pushed away from his seat. “Going to the restroom, hopefully you won’t be so bitchy when I come back.”

Nicola returned with my water. She didn’t say anything before moving on to other customers. Guess that came along with the stigma of having a dead mother everyone thought was a student-molesting pervert. I peeked over my shoulder to make sure nobody stared and dumped salt from the shaker into my drink. It made me feel better, like I was a screwy, human fish.

Andy wriggled into his seat. “See, you’re smiling. Sometimes we have to separate to fall in love again.”

I savored the last few drops before lowering the cup to the laminate tabletop. Licking my lips, I raked my hand through my hair and piled it on top of my head with the ponytail holder around my wrist. The hair tie didn't leave its usual bright indentation in my skin. “Speaking of the “L” word, when was the last time you called Sophie?”

“Last night. She’s still bummed about not being able to find good parties, but after what happened with Kyle at The Li—” Andy shut his mouth. He had said enough.

He’d run off to save her the night we went to The Lighthouse, but I never questioned him about it. Now that I knew Kyle was involved, fear sliced through me. “What did he *do* to her?”

He stared bug-eyed at me over his gigantic sandwich. “Nothing. I mean, not exactly . . .” I knocked the burger from his hand into the plate. It splattered, a mess of meat, pickles and ketchup. “He tried to have sex with her.”

“She didn’t, *right*?”

“No.”

But Kyle had put his lying, greedy hands on my best friend. That disgusted me. I wanted to hurt Kyle. *Lure* him. I squeezed my fingers around the napkin dispenser and waited for Andy to speak. And I plotted.

“Nothing happened,” Andy repeated.

Warped ideas played through my mind, a dark vortex of violent images. I saw Kyle sloshing through shallow water in the direction of my voice and a moment later, I witnessed him lying on the rocks, debris and weeds covering his puffy face. I shuddered and stumbled from my seat. “I’m going to wait in your car.”

After a few minutes, Andy joined me, and even though he tried to

hide his concern, the break in his voice told me he was worried. “You okay, Char?”

I thought I could avoid seeing Lorelei. Now I knew it was impossible. I could hide the heartbeat and even make up an excuse for the nightmares, but I couldn’t take the images racing through my brain. My thoughts constantly went dark whenever Kyle was mentioned, yet today, I was terrified of myself. She *had* to know what was going on with me. Why else would she have given me salt water when I freaked out? “I’m fine, but can you take me somewhere?”

The drive to The Lighthouse was silent. Andy occasionally tried to make disjointed small talk. I couldn’t concentrate on anything he said —visions of Kyle’s watery sentence were more brilliant than before. I pictured him struggling for air and turning various shades of blue as I held him down.

My head was detaching from my body, I was sure of it.

A rental car was parked by Lorelei’s sports car. It was fancy, the kind car rental agencies didn’t lease out to people without platinum credit cards. Andy eyeballed the Mercedes and whistled. “S-Class Roadster. If I admit I’m turned on, will you hold it against me?”

“Um, *yes*. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Wait here,” I warned.

The door to the cottage was cracked, so I lingered out front, tuning in on the conversation inside. Lorelei’s guest was female. And incredibly pissed, if her raised voice was any indication. “Demeter’s not happy with you. From what I hear, she’s put out all sorts of hits on *us*,” she snapped.

Something shattered. “Don’t break my things, Thel. You’re such a child at times.” Lorelei said. A chair scraped across the hard floor. “Besides, someone who wants us dead will never truly be hap—”

“Cut the shit, Aglaope, we both know your actions provoked her. You’ve gone years without Demeter’s hunter bothering you and then you decide to do the one thing that pisses her off the most: you make another siren. Why would you do that?” the woman shrieked. She growled something else and then added in a calm, soft voice, “If you wanted a companion, you could have lived with *me*.”

They were silent for almost a minute, then Lorelei said, “I didn’t do it for companionship.”

“Love? Compassion?”

“Perhaps.”

“Zeus’s beard, you’re pathetic, Ag. You’ll do *anything* for silly emotions. If I rescued every drowning twit I came across, we could have an entire cursed immortal army. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Who the hell was Ag? I couldn’t help thinking Cam was being duped big time by Lorelei’s pretty face, big boobs, and mad piano skills. What if she was an assassin . . . or a spy?

Sure, because assassins are hired to off ex high school basketball stars who still live with their dad.

"The years have made you bitter. It's a shame, you were such a sweet child," Lorelei said. "You can come in now, Charlotte."

My heart stopped mid-beat. Oh god, she knew I was eavesdropping. My eyes darted from Andy's car back to the door, and I wondered if I could make a quick getaway. Leaving would be pointless because she already knew I was there. I tiptoed inside. A spacious, open room furnished in various shades of yellow greeted me. Thick carpets in dark gold were placed strategically throughout the area with lush couches and chairs scattered about. Sculptures and paintings were propped against the walls.

It didn't look like a dump anymore. Hell, it didn't look like any cottage I'd *ever* seen.

Lorelei slouched on one of the couches, frowning, and the person she argued with sat in the armchair with her back to me "Sorry to interrupt, but I need to talk to you," I blurted out, losing my confidence. I planned to confront her and demand answers. Now I was freaking out, sure I intruded on something I shouldn't know about.

The other person stood and turned to me. I instantly recognized the dark hair, the oval-shaped face. Icy blue eyes, the same that graced the cover of magazines and entertainment channels, raked over me.

Holy crap, Lorelei knew Francesca Lauren.

"You're not at *all* what I expected," she mused, circling me. Her voice was singsong, similar to Lorelei's, but mocking. She wasn't what I expected, either. She didn't sound ditzy, like in her interviews. Her fingers sifted through a strand of my hair. I jerked back.

"Stop it!" Lorelei shouted. Her warm green eyes warred against Francesca's narrowed blue ones. I stared helplessly between them.

Lorelei must have won because Francesca pouted then danced to her seat where she slithered down. "You're no fun, Ag." *Who* was Ag? And why was Francesca—crappy actress and maninizer—in Gloucester? With my brother's potential girlfriend.

"You're being difficult." Lorelei ran her fingers down the front of her chiffon blouse. She motioned for me to take a seat on one of the elaborate, jacquard print chairs, and I complied, though I should have run away screaming about their odd conspiracy. "You want answers," she said.

"Of course she does. People tend to gravitate away from you otherwise," Francesca teased.

"Shut your filthy mouth!" The steel in Lorelei's tone carried to her eyes, and they appeared toxic. She wrapped her fingers around the sculpture on her coffee table. I was sure she was about to beat the hell out of Francesca.

The actress stood, sauntered over to Lorelei, and placed a quick kiss on her forehead. “I say these things because I love you. It breaks my heart to see you hurting. Call you when I reach California,” she said. Francesca glided toward the door, carefully sidestepping fragments of a broken vase.

“Good luck, Charlotte. Don’t put your heart into this world—just makes it worse.” Francesca granted Lorelei one last contemptible look before leaving. I jumped at the squeal of tires.

“You have no heart, Thel,” Lorelei whispered.

I was half-aware of Lorelei handing me a mug. “What’s going on?” I wheezed. The salt water immediately took the edge away. “*What’s* happening to me?” My voice was stronger this time.

“Tell your friend he can leave. This might take some time.”

CHAPTER TEN

Andy left without an argument, but I knew that I'd have a million messages waiting in my voicemail by this evening. He was all smiles and wide-eyed as he drove away. Guess I wasn't the only one who'd recognized Francesca.

There was a part of me that anticipated hearing what Lorelei had to say, but mostly I dreaded it. Maybe it was the way her shoulders had slumped when she told me to ask Andy to leave or how she looked at my feet instead of my face when I walked back into the cottage. I only knew there was a 95% chance that her explanation about what was wrong with me would be morbid.

"Ask me anything," she said when I sat down on the couch. She stood at the fireplace, with her back turned to me.

"How do you know Francesca?" It wasn't the question burning a hole in my skull, but it was a start.

She pranced over to the couch and eased down beside me. "She's my sister," she answered nonchalantly, arranging the chipped sculpture on the coffee table. The statuette, a girl strumming a large instrument that resembled a guitar, appeared antique. "Beautiful isn't it?"

No wonder Dad twitched when I answered him with one or two words and a shrug. Evasive people were totally frustrating. "I don't care about your stupid art! What's the matter with me and what does it have to do with you? And Francesca?" Narrowing my eyes, I added, "And what were you talking about before you invited me in?"

"I've upset one of the gods," she explained. "And Francesca was angry with you because of what I did."

Whoa! Lorelei and I had known each other for a short period of time and she was already talking religion. I almost joked that it wasn't a good idea to bring it up for a few more months, but her usual smile had disappeared, replaced by a thin frown. "What do you mean gods?" Was she in some sort of cult? Was she trying to drag Cam into whatever mess she was in, too? "Lorelei, what's going on?"

"You're not dead!" she blurted. I'd never even assumed that, but I swallowed hard, waiting for her to start talking again. "At least not completely. You're a siren, like me and my sister."

"A *what*?"

She jumped to her feet and picked up one of the paintings propped against the wall then handed it to me. The piece was old and fragile and probably belonged in a museum in France instead of a cottage in Massachusetts, but that wasn't what bothered me. It was the face that kicked me in the gut. The girl in the picture plaited her hair and

grinned flirtatiously at the man who gripped the ocean rocks she rested on. The girl was Lorelei.

I pushed it back at her. “You are freaking insane.” My brother really knew how to pick them! He’d attracted a lunatic, a girl convinced she was a mythological creature. She grasped my upper arm to keep me from racing to the door. “Let go or I’ll punch you.”

“I saved you! You drowned, but I had to give you a second chance.”

I closed my eyes, then, and I was back underwater. I remembered the darkness and the pressure, the confusion after I found myself alive on the rocks. Sucking in a deep breath, I sat back down and gripped one of the throw pillows to my chest. My heart pounded slow and steady beneath my thin cotton blouse.

“Our hearts are the same, Charlotte. Seven beats.”

“I don’t understand,” I whispered.

Sirens did not exist. They were like mermaids, Santa Clause, and leprechauns—fun to read about and laugh at in corny movies but completely unreal. Lorelei ground her teeth. An annoying sound that grated the top of my skull. “It’s my job to lead the souls of the dead, but I couldn’t do that to you because you weren’t gone yet.”

“Souls of the dead at sea call out to me, Charlotte. As the body dies, the soul pleads for help. Some refuse to accept their fate even as they travel into the afterlife. You were different. Your soul was accepting, calm about death. And . . .”

“What?”

Her forehead crinkled, like she needed to think about what cracked thing to say next. “You were drawn to my voice. The Lure only affects men, and I wasn’t singing one. I can control what I do, always have, so nobody should have heard me. My kiss saved you, but at a price . . . Now you’re like me.”

Kissed me? How messed up was that? “My best friend would’ve paid to see that.”

She started to hum, and I knew she told the truth. I buried my face in my hands, listening to the singing nobody else heard and silently hating her. I should have been happy I wasn't a nutcase, but I was scared out of my mind. “This is another dream.”

She touched my knee. I slapped her hand away. “I’m afraid it isn’t. None of it is.” She took a deep breath before her next comment. “The salt water keeps you strong, but you don’t need it. We don’t eat, or age, or die, except at the hands of an immortal force.”

“Immortal?” I asked. Slowly, she bobbed her head. “Why should I believe you?”

She pointed toward the window in the direction of The Lighthouse. “I could knock you off the tower.”

“Didn’t you just say that an immortal force can kill me? Wouldn’t I

just die?" The sarcasm in my voice was nastier than I intended, but what did she expect? She'd just told me she'd made me an immortal.

"I meant the gods themselves or an object or person blessed by them."

I snorted, and her scowl deepened. "This goes against everything I've ever known," I hissed. She was next to me before I knew what was happening, pressing my hand to her chest. I counted and hoped to feel a normal rhythm. Our hearts were in sync, though. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven.*

"It's not forever," she said. "You just have to fa—" Three heavy raps shook her front door.

"We'll finish talking later. It's Cammy," she said. Smoothing a hand over her hair, she sang, "Come in."

I had no idea how she knew it was Cam; she never even moved to look outside. He stepped in carrying a massive bouquet of roses and baby's breath. She met him halfway, cooing and giggling over the roses, like one of the girls at school on Valentine's Day. My brother noticed me after I started choking from the overdose of PDA. He hid his tomato red face behind the flowers. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Boy advice," I lied.

He'd driven my Jeep (big surprise) so I waited for him outside. I needed the few minutes alone to slowly begin digesting everything she told me. On the way home, Cam bugged me about her. He wanted to know if she helped with my guy issue, automatically assuming Wyatt was the problem. I didn't bother to correct him.

When he came right out and demanded to know if Lorelei mentioned him, I wanted to warn him to stay away from her. Tell him she was a crazy witch and that he needed to file a restraining order ASAP. The pesky voice in my head cautioned me not to.

She said *we* were the same.

I spent the afternoon and most of the evening locked away in Mom's old office with my face glued to the computer screen. Researching the myth was difficult because I found little information. Each Google search gave me the same result:

Sirens lured men to their watery graves.

My findings sent a wave of dread though me. I sank my teeth deep into my lip, gripped the edge of the desk—*anything* to keep images of Lorelei killing my brother out of my head. I had to talk to her again. I needed to find out what her plans for Cam were.

Cam's cell phone was in its usual spot—inside of the little wicker basket on the counter. Lorelei's number was at the top of his recently called list. I programmed it into my phone. Slinking to my bedroom, I dialed her number. I felt like part protector, part hypocrite, and part

sleaze while I waited for her to pick up.

"Hello?"

She sounded sweet and cheerful. But I knew better. The manipulative voice on the other end wasn't even human. "It's Charlotte," I said.

She took a few gulps of what I guessed was salt water. I nearly told her that regular, mortal people didn't drink like that over the phone because it was rude. "I thought you'd need more time to thi—"

"No. I don't," I hissed. "What do you want from me and my brother?"

She exhaled again. Impatiently, I yanked the phone from my ear so I wouldn't have to endure the sound of her chugging. After a few seconds, I listened in. "You don't understand," she said quietly.

"What?"

"Don't believe everything you read about us, Charlotte. Just because I'm a siren doesn't mean I plan on hurting Cammy or any other man, for that matter."

And she expected me to buy that? Girls had always been crazy about Cam, but Lorelei was a supermodel. Cam was better off without her. "I don't believe you."

She laughed. I swear I heard a snort, too. "Charlotte, if I wanted to harm your brother, I would have done so already. When we met, I saved him after he fell off a boat right in front of me. Do you know how easily I could have lured him while he was so vulnerable?"

Hearing her say that was more frightening than what she revealed before. I grunted, unable to force my thoughts into words. "Think on it for a few days, and we'll talk again when you aren't so temperamental," she implored. "We have a lot to discuss."

A faint click let me know she ended the call. As I fumed over Lorelei hanging up on me, I saw a vivid picture of my brother's body washing up on the shore.

Fish had tortured his carcass.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Got any books on mythology?"

I wasn't a fan of Gloucester Library and they weren't exactly rushing to join the Official Charlotte Brewer Fan Club. Sophie and I were sort of banned five months ago, during midterms, for making too much noise while we studied. Yeah, I didn't know a library could permanently bar someone either, but whatever. The desire to learn more about the creature I'd become was the only thing stopping me from slinking away.

Besides, it had taken a lot of effort for me to stop being a chicken and leave the house.

The librarian stretched his flabby neck up and squinted. "I didn't understand a single word you just said."

Toying with the hem of my shirt, I cleared my throat and repeated, "I'm looking for books about mythology."

"What kind? You realize there's more than one type, don't you?"

God, why doesn't he just add "you stupid girl" to that like he really wants to? "Greek!" I snapped.

He drummed his fingertips on a pile of blank library cards and darted his eyes to a row of computers. I waited for him to tell me to stop being lazy and look the books up myself. "Check this section," he said, scribbling on a piece of torn paper.

The books I needed were on the bottom three rows of the shelf. A thick layer of dust clung to the stack I carried with me to a table. "Don't they clean?" I brushed the gray fuzz onto my jeans. Sliding into a chair, I opened the first book, a thin paperback with coffee stains covering the pages. Two tables away, a kid poked his tongue out at me. My inner child took over, and I twisted my face into a nasty scowl. He tugged on his mom's arm. She glanced up, narrowed her eyes, and whispered something. I buried my nose in the book to ignore them.

One book said sirens were simply beautiful women and another claimed they were birds with human heads. I seriously hoped that I wouldn't sprout talons overnight. Lorelei sported Big Bird yellow 24/7, but her legs looked normal. At least, I thought they did. I wrote a reminder in my notepad to ask her about the bird bodies. The last thing I wanted was to morph into a giant vulture on the full moon.

By the time I opened the fourth book—one telling about the monsters enticing men to their island, eating their flesh, then dancing on bleached bones—I felt dizzy. *The Odyssey* gave me some hope, at least. "Beeswax in the ears," I whispered. Homer's poem was fiction, but up until a few days ago, I thought sirens were, too.

Somebody fell into the seat next to me. I jumped and dropped the book. “Studying already? “ Sophie swiped the first book from the edge of the table.

I jerked the paperback from her hands and loaded it on top of the others. “Stalk much? What are you doing here?”

She played with the strap on her bag. “I was bored and wanted to go bowling. Called your house, but Cam said he dropped you off here.” Her dark blue eyes dropped to the books I guarded. “Dude, don’t tell me you’re taking drama this year.”

“They’re for English class.”

“Whatever, drama geek, let’s go. If you beat me, I’ll buy you ice-cream.”

The only thing I wanted to do was sit in the library and read about the screwed up fantasy I was now part of. But Sophie wasn’t high today. Her eyes twinkled when she talked about bowling, so I agreed to go and even sang whiny pop songs with her on the way.

We used to bowl every weekend, back when our parents took turns dropping us off at the Mega Bowl in Eastern Point. Sophie met the Summer Boy who’d screwed her over at the bowling alley. After they broke up, parties at The Lighthouse became our new pastime.

She plucked a shiny emerald ball off the rack. “My parents are making me get a job.”

“Well, get one.”

She hurled the ball down the lane, dancing when she managed a strike. “Think Rob will hire me?”

I selected my own ball from the shelf, not caring that it was excessively big for my fingers. The prospect of working with Sophie tore me. I was scared to give her a recommendation because I didn’t want her to come to work high, but she was also my best friend. And that took precedence over my worries. I stepped past her and rolled the ball. Three pins toppled over. “A girl quit a couple weeks ago, so it’s worth a shot.”

She hugged me. “I would totally marry you, Charlotte Brewer.” Then she glanced over my shoulder and her lips twitched. “On second thought, I’ll take him.”

I looked to see who she was ogling. Matt waved at me and announced noisily, “You following me around, Goose?”

Sophie, smiling like the Cheshire Cat, turned excited eyes on me. “Hot!” she mouthed. Matt grinned at her.

“Haven’t seen you in a long time, Chase,” he said.

“Oh, I’ve been around,” she croaked. She bobbed her head for a few moments, trying to come up with a smarter response. No wonder she couldn’t stop blushing—he really was hot.

Thinking that made me feel dirty, especially after I saw Eva headed

toward us, carrying a giant soda and nachos. Matt reintroduced us then asked if they could play. In true fangirl form that made me want to shake her, Sophie agreed.

"So . . . did you just move here?" I asked Eva when Matt disappeared to the restroom. She stared at me sideways, and tossed her braid over her left shoulder.

"Sort of."

A girl of limited words. Sweet. "How'd you meet Robbins?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound jealous or like a nosy freak.

"Oh, I've known him forever." She began gnawing on the tip of her straw. I was certain she had no interest in making friends other than him. Matt sat down with us, and her personality did a 180. She became talkative and flirtatious, offering him her drink and food. "It's no trouble, you know that. I can go get you your own if you want!"

I watched, awed and somewhat peeved, as she bounced away to the concession stand to buy him snacks. Eva treated Matt like the crowned prince of Gloucester. "God, where can I find one?" Sophie laughed, taking the words right out of my mouth.

"Trust me, you don't want to," he said quietly.

Sophie pinched my thigh under the table. It didn't hurt, and I wouldn't have known what she did it if I wasn't looking. I pinched her back. She winced. The game began once Eva gave Matt his offering of candy and food. Sophie bowled first and knocked down nine pins. She was a bowling prodigy, and I sucked. Horribly.

Matt pulled a crushed pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shook out a menthol stick. "Looked like you took the news about Sidney pretty hard. I was worried about you."

I was sure I heard Eva snivel.

My skin felt tight and drawn as he lit his cigarette. Sophie sat backwards in her seat and jerked the pack from his grasp. "Thanks," she said, taking a few. She nodded toward the ball rack. "I'm sure Charlotte doesn't mind if you bowl for her. She *hates* bowling."

I shot her an evil look as he sauntered off with Eva following behind him to roll my turn. "What the hell?"

"You didn't tell me he was interested in you." She exhaled a twisting cloud of smoke that made me feel as if my clothes were shrinking.

Once the discomfort passed, I shook my head. "See his shadow? He's definitely not into me. And even if he was, I wouldn't do the shit she does."

"Whatever."

We spent the next couple hours bowling. Despite Eva's obsessive, disturbing nature, I was genuinely disappointed to see Matt go. "Should see you in school soon," he said in the parking lot.

“Fun, I’ll try not to go into excitement-induced cartwheels.”

The area around his dark eyes crinkled. “You’re funny.” Sophie stood by her car, tapping her foot impatiently. He lifted his chin and waved. “See you around, Chase!”

“I’ll beat you then, too,” she yelled.

He didn’t say goodbye, instead he leaned forward with his eyebrows scrunched together. Finally, he stepped away and whispered, “You remind me of the beach.” I stood perfectly still as he walked away. Every few seconds, he cast a quick glance over his shoulder.

Smelling like sand, sun, and salt must be a part of the I’m-a-mythological-monster package.

Eva sat in the front seat of Matt’s car, her narrowed eyes glued to me.

Before Sophie took me home, I asked her to stop by a drug store. I spent almost fifty dollars on beeswax lip balm. If it kept Lorelei from killing my brother, it was worth it, but I’d figure out a way to make him pay me back.

I sat in bed, sipping salt water and dove into the world of gods and nymphs and sirens. My teeth sank into my tongue as I read a longer, creepier version of everything Lorelei claimed. If sirens were real, what other mythological stuff lurked about?

Admittedly, part of what I learned mystified me. My voice had powers. I guided the dead.

And I was definitely immortal.

Dad, dressed in khakis and a starched golf shirt, stuck his head into my room a few minutes after eight. The site of him dressed up always amazed me. I raised both eyebrows. “Going somewhere?

“Blind date,” he said, blushing.

This was a big step for my dad, and I was proud of him. I smiled. “Go you!”

“I think Cam and Lorelei are going to a movie. You should go with them.” He didn’t notice my fist tighten around the book I was reading.

“No!”

“She really is nice, Char. It would be good for you to go out.”

“Don’t you think she’s weird? Don’t you think Cam should, I don’t know, find someone who isn’t so perfect?” My voice was desperate and high-pitched.

Dad shrugged. He smoothed the front of his pants. “Cam’s eighteen, kiddo, he can make his own decisions.”

“Exactly! She’s only seventeen. I mean, isn’t that illegal? You wouldn’t want Cam going to jail, right?” I was running out of excuses, and Dad cocked an eyebrow.

“I’ll be back a little after eleven, Char. Maybe you should stay out of your brother’s personal life.”

Too bad he had no clue how deadly Cam's personal life had become.

***

Our replacement trig teacher was nowhere near as lenient as Mr. Sidney, and I escaped the exhausting, ninety-minute class to discover a message from Wyatt on my voicemail. I listened to his voice, picking out certain words that made his accent sound more Southern.

"Hey, it's Wyatt. I'll pick you up for the barbecue at seven, and Charlotte? I've thought about you the past few days . . . a lot, to tell the truth. Can't wait for tonight."

By the third time I replayed the message, I was depressed. Yeah, totally emo, right? Wyatt's mom looked immaculate the morning I met her. No doubt everyone at the party tonight would be just as well-dressed. My usual t-shirt and jeans, while comfortable, wouldn't do.

I feared a trip to the mall, though I had no choice, and I only knew one person who could help me dress like a Summer Girl. When Lorelei answered on the second ring and sang a greeting into the receiver, I forced myself to sound cheerful. She practically squealed in excitement once I asked for her opinion and agreed to meet me in front of the mall. Shopping was second nature for psycho siren.

"How long have you been like this?" The question had burned in my mind for days.

"Over 3,000 years, but I was born a muse named Aglaope."

That's why Francesca had referred to Lorelei as Ag. "And Francesca?"

"Thelxiope. She's a year older." I sneered and Lorelei laughed. "You thought she was younger, huh? We've lived different lifestyles. Over the years, she's maintained a public image—princess of one nation, the mistress who ripped apart another, an actress, obviously. She enjoys the spotlight because she believes she'll stay safe if there are always others around."

Why would Francesca need protection? She was an immortal who already lived for so long. Lorelei said only gods could harm sirens, but I couldn't see anyone wanting to hurt her. "And you keep to yourself?"

"Yes."

"Ever changed anyone else?"

Lorelei pretended to focus on other shoppers passing by. "Once."

It was a touchy topic for her, and to break the tension, I said, "Just remember that me asking you for help *doesn't* make us friends."

The change of subject worked, because Lorelei giggled. A few Summer Boys passing by stopped to eye-hump her. "I figured you'd say something like that."

Out of curiosity, I twirled around to see if the guys still stared. Yep, same spot with the exact same fly-in-the-open mouth expression. "That happen to you a lot?

She shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Translation: *Oh, just every time I happen to meet the affectionate gaze of my admirers.*

“If I’m like you, how come they don’t do that to me?” Not that I wanted them to. I would freak out if men followed me around with doofy expressions.

I expected Lorelei to snicker and remind me that she looked like a supermodel, not the girl next door. Instead a radiant smile lifted her lips. “I was born a muse, Charlotte. Just last month, you were a mortal. My sole purpose was to inspire creativity and desire. And lust.”

I made a face. “Sick. So . . . does every *thing* like you just hang out in the regular world?”

“I’m not a thing, Charlotte. And yes, many do interact with humans.”

“And this is normal?” I pointed to a group of girls passing by. “I mean, they could be gods and I wouldn’t know jack-crap about it.”

“No. You’ll know a god when you meet one. Trust me. It’s the half-gods you have to worry about.”

“Why?”

Another group of guys stared blatantly at Lorelei. She yawned then turned and whispered, “It’s almost impossible for us to identify demigods because they have no effect on us. Unless they let us know who they are, their identities can only be revealed through” — she sidled close and wriggled her fingers— “touch.”

I didn’t question her about what a regular god’s effect was because we stopped moving. Staring up at the door sign of the store she wanted to go in, I hissed, “No. Hell no!”

“Stop being so dramatic.” She grabbed my hand and dragged me through the glass double doors. “Besides, you have to step outside your comfort zone on occasion. If you didn’t want to impress him, you wouldn’t have contacted me.”

Who did she think was?

All the rich girls shopped at Tidal, and while Lorelei looked as if she belonged, I felt out of place. I feigned disinterest as she plucked dresses from the rack in the juniors section. Planting one hand on my hip, I jabbed a finger at the overflow of frills and bright fabric threatening to tumble from her arms. “You do realize that I’ll have to spend my entire paycheck on just *one* of those, right?”

She pursed her lips together, but kept her focus on the dresses. “It’s my treat, love is priceless.”

Now who was the dramatic one?

I almost choked on my own saliva. Lorelei was like a leggy, blonde *Care Bear*. Love was one of those words I had trouble saying aloud,

even to Dad and Cam. I had no problem admitting Wyatt Anderson was hot and a good kisser, but to fall in love with him? Absolutely not. “Golden Boy and I are just friends.”

“If you say so.” She hummed, and men turned to look at her.

Over the past couple days, I read everything I could get my hands on about sirens, particularly *The Odyssey*. “Can you not sing?” I asked nervously. “You’ll cause a mass suicide in the mall fountain. It’s made of stone, you know?”

Her laughter broke the trance on the male population of the store. Relieved, I sighed. “Oh, Charlotte, you’re so adorable. I haven’t done a true Lure in years,” she whispered.

I wasn’t a fan of her talking to me like I was ten, but I shrugged it off. “So singing men to death *is* possible? They just off themselves by drowning?”

“Yes, but it isn’t a good idea.” With her eyelids lowered, I couldn’t tell whether she was being sincere. “Innocent people die.”

“Lorelei, Brian and my trigonometry teacher . . . um, you didn’t . . .”

Her eyes popped open as she shook her head. “No!” I shuddered, and she added, “You didn’t either. Both were just horrible tragedies. You simply guided them.”

Very creepy. I was still having a hard time grasping that my nightmares were real. “Why did it seem like a dream?”

She dumped the stack of dresses into the arms of a sales clerk—a guy with spiked blue hair and a piercing above his lip. Once he hurried off to a dressing room, she said, “Because you’re obsessed with reality. In your mind, you have this idea of what’s real, what’s fantasy. It affects you when you guide. Hopefully, you’re conscious of what you’re doing now that you know.”

We followed at a slow pace behind the sales guy. “Do you like being immortal?”

“No.”

“Because it’s lonely?”

Once again, I couldn’t read her expression because all emotion dripped from her green eyes. “No,” she said. “We don’t have souls, Charlotte.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lorelei spent the rest of our shopping trip stressing that I should *want* a soul but never said why it was so important. Before she turned me into a siren, she was in charge of leading both good and bad people, which explained what the little girl had told me. She seemed jealous of the souls she directed; despite the fact they were truly immoral. Her reaction to the good souls was even more Psycho Sally.

I managed to steer the conversation from soul worship when I asked her to help me get ready for Wyatt's party. She took one pitying look at my faded Jack Skeleton t-shirt and ripped jeans and turned her button nose up. Fifteen minutes after she turned me into her charity project, she started up on the lecture again.

Lucky me.

"Even horrible, evil people *have* a soul," she said, tapping the brush handle on my forehead to emphasize each word. I wanted to point out they were dead, but the wild look in her eyes stopped me.

"Can a guy escape you by plugging his ears with wax?"

She stopped fussing with my hair and grinned at me in the dresser mirror. "You read Homer, didn't you? Oh, Charlotte, that man always exaggerated. Beeswax doesn't work." She dropped her gaze to the assortment of Burt's Bees lip balm scattered across the warped wood. "I told you I have no intention of hurting your brother. He'll worry if you ask him to stick that in his ears."

"What do you even see in him?" I demanded. "He's all screwed up."

She ran the brush through my brown hair a final time and tilted her head to one side. "He's genuine and doesn't lie. After centuries of meeting people who are cruel and selfish, people who are superficial and use beauty and deception to gain . . . well, Cam is refreshing. He has problems, but he's human. It's expected." She winked at me. "Plus, his eyes are beautiful."

My brother was refreshing. *Right.*

Wyatt knocked on the front door three minutes before seven. Dad let him in, and I was glad I let Lorelei take me shopping because he grinned as soon as I staggered into the living room on the wedged platforms she talked me into getting. She called the strapless flowery number flirty when I tried it on. I guess she was right. The only jewelry I wore were the diamond earrings she pressed into my palm before leaving.

They probably cost more than my decrepit car.

Wyatt leaned down to brush his lips against my cheek. "You look incredible."

Dad told me to have fun and stomped from the room. "Liar," I

whispered to Wyatt, grabbing my bag from my father's recliner and followed Wyatt out the door. "Bye, Dad!" He responded with a guttural grunt. Wyatt's fingers threaded through mine as we walked to his truck, but I pulled away when he laughed.

"What's so funny?"

He opened my door before trailing his thumb across my bare shoulder. "I'm lucky."

If I could flush, I would have. I rolled my eyes instead and waited until he was in his seat and driving in the direction of Palmetto Dunes to comment. "Seriously though, I hate liars."

If Wyatt's parents were rich, their friends were even wealthier. Luxury cars filled the circular front drive of their home. BMW, Mercedes, and Porsche—you name a car, it was there. I balled up the fabric of my dress to avoid freaking out. *I'm so out of my element. I should be swimming or catching fish with my teeth. Not mingling with Summer Kids and their parents.*

His mother went all out with the patriotic decorations—red, white, and blue streamers and even a tall, super-creepy statue of Uncle Sam. I guaranteed she decorated the entire house for every holiday. They probably all sat around carving pumpkins and chugging spiced cider at Halloween.

We stopped in the spotless kitchen before going outside. His mother's hair was swirled in the hairstyle I assumed she sported for dinner parties, but she nixed the pearls for a diamond necklace. A guy with a scruffy goatee sat at the table drinking a Bloody Mary. He had the same smile as Mrs. Anderson and Wyatt.

Mrs. Anderson kissed me on the cheek. "Charlotte, I'm so glad you came." I was shocked she remembered my name, but Wyatt likely reminded her that he invited the waitress from across town. I half-expected her to plunk a plate of hors d'oeuvres in my hand and tell me to get to work.

"Thanks for inviting me." I wondered what she would do if I dropped the F-bomb in her painstakingly clean stainless steel and granite kitchen.

The guy at the table lifted his chin. "I'm Jonah."

Wyatt draped his arm around my shoulders. "My older brother. Watch out for him." Tonight, I would be nice and not shove him away in front of his mother.

"I'll try to," I said. I started to ask about Wyatt's twin, but Jonah brought her up before I could speak.

"Audrey's away for the summer. You should be glad. She's an airhead, and she'll talk your fucking ear off." Oh, hell yes. Jonah Anderson was made of awesome. I held my breath when a cookbook sailed across the room and smacked him in the forehead. His mother

shot him a warning glare.

I nodded and twisted my fingers together waiting for someone to say something. Wyatt cracked the silence. “Let’s go eat.” He steered me out the back door, onto the deck.

“Next time you touch me in front of your mom, I’ll knee you in the —” I didn’t finish because as we weaved through the throng of partygoers, his touch dissolved my nervousness. He lowered his eyes to my face, waiting for me to argue with him. I wouldn’t. Tonight, I wouldn’t fight the force dragging me toward him.

I’d save that battle for tomorrow.

“I love when you threaten me.” He brushed my ear with his lips. I shivered when his breath touched my skin.

“Son, who’s your guest?” asked a man’s voice. A stony expression quickly replaced Wyatt’s playful one. We turned around in the direction of the voice, and I decided that if my dad looked at me like that, I’d frown, too. Wyatt’s father, with his graying hair and brown eyes, was imposing and stuffy looking.

I was glad Golden Boy was nothing like him.

“Dad, this is Charlotte Brewer.”

Mr. Anderson’s hand shake was tight and firm. He didn't smile much, obviously, because the one he gave me looked displaced on his stern face. “It’s nice to meet you, Charlotte.”

“You too,” I said. But I was ecstatic when he moved on to talk to someone else.

“He can be a little intimidating,” Wyatt said. I followed him to the long table of food. “He’s planning a run for senate.”

I lifted an eyebrow, watching him pile his plate with grilled corn, crab cakes, and lobster. When my parents used to hold barbecues, we ate off Styrofoam plates and Dad’s friends drank beer straight from the can. His Mom brought out real china and champagne flutes. I swiped a bottle of water from the metal ice cooler.

“Politics, huh?”

He flushed and shrugged. “My family’s pretty involved in politics.”

“So I‘m rubbing elbows with the future president?”

He tilted his head, contemplating the bottle of water in my hand. “You’re not eating.”

“I’m not hungry yet.” I needed a new excuse for my lack of appetite. Claiming I wasn’t hungry was beginning to sound old *and* pitiful. I carried his drink down to our table on the beach.

We talked about summer school, stopping mid-conversation several times to speak to his parents’ friends wandering by. After he finished eating, we walked the beach. He plucked my hair loose. I punched his arm when he dangled my hair tie above my nose.

“I hate when you do that,” I said.

He pressed the ponytail holder in my palm and closed my fingers around it. “I can’t keep you out of my head. Can’t even go for a swim without thinking of the way you smell.”

“You’re a total creeper.” But I couldn’t help smiling.

He captured my chin between his thumb and forefinger and brought my face to his. His lips made me defenseless, like it was impossible to fight him, even if I wanted to. I should have despised him for that, but I hated myself for wanting—no, *needing*—more. I swallowed hard as he pulled back and kept my eyes closed, hoping to savor the bittersweet moment and wishing for more of him. “You make me weak,” he said.

A voice crying out broke the moment. I took a step back into reality and waited for the man to speak again. *“Help me.”* The noise of the party faded, and I only heard the sound of a heart beating underwater. Strong at first, then it slowly thinned until it was a faint wisp. He pleaded that he wasn’t ready to die, his voice engulfing me and luring me to the sea.

The man’s heart suddenly stopped. He was ready for me to guide him. Wyatt stumbled next to me and squeezed my shoulder. We stood together, watching waves crash against the rocks. Did Golden Boy wonder why I was so odd? “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing.” He wrapped his arms around me when I shivered. “Hey, Wyatt? Stay out of the water, okay?”

***

Since the soul calmed down, I waited until after Wyatt dropped me off at home to return to the sea. My journey to the whirlpool of light was simple now that I knew what was going on. Tonight, there were fifteen souls to guide, and I chatted with the man I sensed dying earlier. Jameson was from Cape Ann, unlike the rest of the souls—three others from America and the remaining eleven from various countries.

“*Will you tell Danielle about the safe*?”

Danielle was his girlfriend—pregnant girlfriend to be exact. He’d stashed a quarter of a million dollars in one of those rental safes in the post office. It was stupid not to use a real bank, but I didn't tell him that, because he was dead. My insult would have made him feel bad, and his night was already on a foul, downward spiral.

“I don’t think I can interfere,” I said.

“*Do you think they’ll find Cathy*?”

I rolled my eyes. Would it be wrong to call him a man-whore? I decided it would be, since him and his wife were not together in the year preceding his death. At least, that’s what he claimed. His wife evidently wasn’t pleased with their arrangement, because tonight, she lodged a bullet in his small intestine and dragged him into the

Atlantic.

"I'm sure the cops will do all they can do." Like when they gave me a ticket for trespassing ten minutes after my rescue. He seemed pleased with my answer so I opted not to tell him about my legal bullshit.

We stopped above the whirlpool, and he looked down and sighed. "*Are you sure it's okay?*"

"Does it look like hell to you? You don't see bright red pitchforks hanging out, do you? Besides" —I pointed to the other 14 people diving in— "they don't look scared."

He hung his liquid head and shrugged. "*I guess you're right. See you, Charlotte.*" Of course he'd never see me again, but I waved goodbye. As the light sucked him in, I wondered what the afterlife was like on the other side. Moonlight acted as my guide to the surface. The sound of my heart—and someone else's speedy, normal heart—thudded in my ears, and I swam faster. I pushed my head out of the water, inhaling the muggy night air.

The other heart continued to pound, stronger and faster.

Someone was waiting for me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rob pulled me aside as soon as I walked into Romano's Saturday night. "You passed your drug test." He leaned on the bar with his face pulled into the long, anteater look he did when he was deep in thought. "And I hired your friend, Sophie."

I shoved my bag beneath the bar. "Thanks for sounding so disappointed about my drug test."

"I'm keeping my eye on you, Charlotte. *And* your friend," Rob warned. He walked off, stopping at different tables to harass customers and suck up to Summer Kids. I wondered about the actual results of my drug test. I pictured the workers in the lab handling my test and snickered.

Hmm. Well, she's not a pothead and she hasn't been shooting up heroin, but she's excessively high on salt. Is that what the kids are floating on these days?

Sophie hopped in front of me and twirled in a circle. "So what do you think?" Not sure what the big deal was. She wore the same outfit as me—the white Romano's t-shirt and black work pants. The only difference between us was she looked happy to be working.

"You look great?" Sober Sophie would take some getting used to, especially since she worked with me now, but it was awesome to have her back. She smiled, twirled a few more times, then grabbed someone's receipt from the counter.

She didn't ask for my help all night, and I had to admit, I was impressed. I forced myself to endure her cigarette habit when she took a break. Being so close to the heavy smoke made my skin leathery. "How was dinner with your boyfriend?"

When she called yesterday evening to ask if I wanted to go to the teen club in Savannah, I told her about my plans. Not a very smart move, because Sophie didn't buy my story about Golden Boy and I being nothing but friends. Because friends kiss, right?

I played with a dust bunny on my pants and smiled at a few customers passing by. They scowled at Sophie, possibly wondering if her cigarette butt would end up in their grilled salmon salad. "He's not my boyfriend, okay? But dinner was good. What'd you do last night? Go to Onyx."

"Negative. Went to my grandma's with Mom and Dad, and before you ask, it sucked."

Laughing, I asked, "Why didn't you just go with Andy?"

Sophie's shoulders sagged and she shook her head miserably. "He won't talk to me!"

Uh oh. Whenever the best friends didn't speak, my life reeked. He'd

ignore her until she became teary-eyed and depressed. There was no way I was letting him screw up her sobriety. Sometimes, I wished they'd just date and get it over with.

No, I take that back.

The fights would only escalate if they were a couple.

Rob threw the door open, scowling at us. "Girls, get your asses inside. I'm not paying you to smoke and gossip." Sophie didn't make a wise crack about Rob being a cash pirate, and it worried me.

I needed to have a one on one with Andy A.S.A.P.

***

Lorelei gripped her steering wheel, running her thumb nails roughly across the leather. "We have a meeting today." At 5:30 in morning, she called me to her cottage. And like an idiot, I went. This was her first explanation of what was going on.

"A meeting? At" —I rapped my knuckles on the dashboard clock— "6:21?"

She glared and jabbed the power button on the radio. It was amazing how she went from nervous to irritable to some other form of crazy, all in a matter of seconds. In two minutes, she'd be ecstatic about something. "Hermes needs to see us."

He sure picked a weird spot, I thought when she parked by the entrance to my school's football field. We stood in the middle of the field, me digging the heel of my flip-flop into the 20-yard line mark, and Lorelei playing with her phone.

"He says he'll be here shortly," she declared.

"You have E.S.P. with the gods?"

She scoffed. Whatever happened to all that B.S. about no question is a stupid question. "No, text messaging, silly."

I'm not sure what I expected. A horse drawn chariot, maybe, or for Hermes to show up in a cloud of smoke and sparkles, but neither happened. Instead, he walked across the field like a regular person— you know, if regular people were insanely beautiful. His black hair was styled in a buzz cut, and he wore jeans and a snug light blue t-shirt that showed off his abs. When he drew closer, I noticed his eyes matched his shirt.

Hermes was hot soccer player meets well-coiffed Disney Channel movie star.

He didn't look any older than Cam, and that was pushing it. "What is he, like, eighteen?"

"Looks are deceiving, Charlotte. Hermes has a thousand up on me. Remember what I told you about pointing out a god?" I nodded, and she said, "Listen to your heart."

I waited for the beat, but it didn't come.

Oh goody. Gods come around and stop our hearts. What happens when

they go away? Convulsions and death?

Hermes stopped in front of Lorelei, bent to kiss her, and clutched his heart after she turned her cheek. He ran his mouth from her jaw line to the corner of her lips. The skin he touched changed to shimmering silver. “Aglaope, it’s been awhile.”

She snorted. “Sixty-five years, to be exact.” Her frosty tone and MMA fighter stance floored me. She and Hermes used to be an item. “Charlotte, this is Hermes—messenger for Zeus, sports enthusiast, and thief. Basically, a tool.”

Ouch.

“Good to meet you,” I said. He took my hands and sparks of electricity flowed beneath my skin. My flesh slowly lightened until it matched Lorelei’s cheek. “Whoa . . .”

“I always love the new ones,” he sighed, letting me go.

“I know you do,” Lorelei snapped. “What do you want?”

Hermes and Lorelei stared at each other—two immortals with a boatload of past relationship issues. I wanted to slink away before one of them choked the other out, or worse, started a hate-fueled make out session.

“Demeter has a message for you.”

Lorelei drew her eyebrows together and chewed on the middle of her lip. “And she sent you to deliver it? I was pretty sure she hated you.”

“Apparently not as much as she loathes you and your new”—he flicked his hand at me—“protégé.”

Did he have to be so flippant about me?

While Hermes and Lorelei argued about the message Demeter sent, I sulked to the bleachers. I never pegged her as a tantrum thrower, but she jumped up and down like a lunatic. Some people got off on witnessing drama. Not me. Three minutes of watching them attack each other just about put me to sleep. I pulled out my phone and amused myself with Tetris.

Heels clacking on the concrete bleachers interrupted my concentration, and I lost the game. I slammed my phone shut and stuck it in my pocket. “We’re leaving!”

I looked up at Hermes. Lorelei sucked air through her teeth. “Watch, he’ll make a stupid grand exit to impress you.” Sure enough, five seconds later, Hermes hovered at least thirty feet above the football field. He waved at me then blew Lorelei a kiss. “See what I mean? Someone should tell him that winged Birkenstocks are tragic.”

“I take it you don’t like Hermes?” I asked her in the car.

“Demeter sending messages through Hermes is what I don’t like. She hasn’t done this in over a thousand years . . . I’m going to have to call Thel and see what she thinks. Next thing you know we’ll be summoned by Zeus and the rest of the gods.”

I played with the lock button on the side of my door, listening at the continuous clicking. I wanted to ask her what Hermes had told her, but I knew she wouldn’t be honest about it. Whatever it was bothered her—I could tell by the way she clacked her teeth together. “Maybe they will. Then they’ll sacrifice us to the Kraken,” I joked.

She swerved onto the shoulder of the road. “I hate when you try to be humorous.”

***

Andy invited me over to his place, one of those kickass houses on stilts, Monday after school for a horror movie marathon. Since I wanted to corner him about Sophie, I seized the moment.

“You’re not watching.” he stuffed his face with a handful of barbecue flavored pork rinds. He flashed a food-filled smile when I made a face. It was impossible to pay attention. The movie—a straight to DVD rip-off of *Saw*—sucked.

I whacked him with a fringed throw pillow and covered my nose. “Ugh, you’re disgusting.” He threw a handful at my hair. I retaliated by chucking my dirty flip-flop at his chest. He shrugged and wiped his hands on the arm of the couch. I hoped his mom would do a sniff test and freak out on him.

“They’re better than water. That all you drink now?”

What was with everyone bugging me about the stupid water? At least I wasn’t stirring dollops of salt into it as I wanted. I brought my knees to my chest. “When was the last time you talked to Sophie?”

He scratched his afro, avoiding my gaze. “I hate when you do that.”

Of course, I knew exactly what he disliked, but I asked, “Huh?” He shoved the bag of pork rinds onto the coffee table.

“Changing the subject. And I haven’t talked to *her* in a few days because it’s complicated.”

Sophie and Andy were normal. I was a freaking monster who could drown a man just by singing to him. Throw in a relationship with a

boy I never imagined dating and my life exceeded complicated. “You should just ask her out,” I said.

He didn’t speak. Andy always counted when he was angry, and sure enough, he answered me after counting to fifty. I saw him mouth the number. “No.”

“Do you even have a reason for being pissed at her this time? You know, besides the fact that you can’t just tell her the truth?”

“Ask Jason Nelson.”

Jason was a jerk who had sex with any female who moved, and Sophie fit his minimum requirements. *Why didn’t I figure out there was more to the story when I told her I would talk to him?* My own life was too dramatic to worry about my friend’s love triangle, or square, or whatever it was. I hoped that refusing to intervene would set them on the path to fix things on their own.

My visit with Andy lasted another excruciating hour where he spent the final thirty minutes bugging me about Francesca. When I told him to ask Lorelei, his pissy mood returned and he offered to drive me home.

Sometimes, he was bitchier than the Summer Kids who came into Romano’s.

I was already irritated when I stepped into the house, but finding Lorelei in the kitchen playing Scrabble with Cam and my dad just made me want to vomit. Did she ever go home?

“Have fun with Andy?” Dad looked up, smiling.

I felt like a jerk for being jealous, but when she was around, it was as if Dad finally discovered his perfect daughter. Made me sick. “Oh, yes,” I said. “I got to listen to him whine about his love life.”

My dad excused himself, and I glared over Cam’s shoulder at Lorelei. “What are you doing to them,” I mouthed. Lorelei could send men into a daze with her singing— I witnessed *that* when she took me shopping. Had she tried that hazy routine on Dad, on my brother? I refused to let her hypnotize either.

“You should join, Char,” Cam said, holding a square playing piece up at me.

Yep, definitely brainwashed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The type of scratches on your car is the best way to gauge just how screwed up a person is. Fingernails created the ones on the side of my Jeep, stretching from the base of the window down the driver side door. I was dealing with a psychopath. Fun.

"Hey, Goose," Matt said from behind me, "why'd you . . . oh shit."

He came beside me and knelt down to get a closer look. I pressed my hand flat against part of the artwork and frowned at him. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Who'd you piss off?"

Your girlfriend. I wouldn't say it, but she seemed like the logical suspect. "I called some Summer Girl an idiot at work," I said. The longer I stayed a siren, the less I twitched when I lied.

"And Rob Romano let you get away with that?"

I shook my head. A lock of hair fell over his eye, and he blew it out of his face. "What Rob doesn't know won't hurt him." I pretended to fish through my bag for my keys, even though I knew they were in the side pocket. "Besides, everyone knows Rob just cares about the money. Does crazy stuff to some people."

Matt snorted, standing up. "You have *no* idea." The humor in his voice didn't extend to his face. Fear, then desperation, flashed in his dark eyes. He blinked, and the look dissolved.

My curiosity didn't. "What's that mean?"

At first, I didn't think he would answer me. He stood still with his forehead scrunched and cheeks sucked in. I did not move either, hoping he would keep talking. After a painfully long moment, he relaxed his face.

"People will do anything if they have debt hanging over them." He grinned and winked, but I wasn't convinced everything was alright. "Or if they're greedy."

What would Matt know about debt? *Maybe Eva is threatening him. Or he owes someone money*. I bit my tongue so I wouldn't annoy him with more nosy questions.

"You got any colleges in mind yet? I hear those college girls bust windows, too," he said. No wonder Andy hated when I changed the subject. I wanted to be annoyed, but laughter returned to his eyes. I gave him a close-lipped smile, straightened, and brushed a strand of hair from my lips with the back of my arm.

Before Mom died, I planned on going to Bradford since it was her Alma Mater. It was still an option, but I'd have to qualify for a bunch of scholarships. It was somewhat sad because most people believed Dad got an enormous life insurance settlement after she died. If that

were the case, Cam would be at school. Guess nobody realized that suicide doesn't pay out. Morbid to say that, huh? "Not sure—what about you?

"I'm taking classes at community college after this then heading to NYU."

"What are you majoring in?"

"English. Told you, your mom was my favorite."

Hearing that from anyone else would have sucked. Matt was sincere, and I nodded slowly. "Awesome."

On the ride home, I didn't think about Eva or my keyed car. I thought about my mother. Kyle accused her of having sex with him a few weeks before the school year ended last summer. I knew something was wrong when I returned home after seeing a movie with Sophie and found her sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of vodka.

She never drank.

I'd flipped on the kitchen lights, and Mom seemed so fragile, so thin and exhausted. She begged me to kill the switch. I listened. That was Friday. By Monday, she was placed on leave without pay. By Wednesday, the whole school buzzed with the rumor.

Two weeks later—the week summer vacation began—she died, and everyone assumed it was true. Even Dad and Cam sometimes thought the same, though they never said those exact words aloud. I could just tell.

Just like I knew she never touched Kyle.

I realized I'd pulled into my driveway. Dad's truck was gone, and I needed release therapy.

***

Singing felt peaceful and soothing.

The music pouring from my lips sounded like something that should have been in a concert hall. I laughed at Wyatt the morning he swore I sang, but I *did,* and it sounded damn awesome. I sat cross-legged on the rocks by The Lighthouse with my hands stretched out in front of me. Salt water sprayed my palms and traveled to the rest of my body, waking my senses and making me feel healthy, alive.

I lay flat on my back and stared at the darkening sky, entranced by the swirling lavender and gold sunset. Finally, I squeezed my eyes shut. Separated myself from reality. I hummed softly. Waves rocked around me, the subtle sound fusing with my voice like well-timed percussion.

"Charlotte?"

"I'm thinking, Mom." As soon as I spoke the words, I shot straight up. I stumbled around like a crazy person, trying to point out where her voice came from. "Mom? Are you there?"

“Help me.”

I didn’t think before I dove. I waited for her to speak again and for her hand to grasp mine, but it never happened. On top of everything else stressing me out, I was sporadically hearing my mom's voice. She was constantly in my thoughts, so I was sure it was possible.

When something—someone—gripped my foot, I turned in anticipation, expecting to see Mom’s translucent hand holding me. Five solid fingers locked around my ankle. The steady heartbeat was familiar, the same I heard the night I led the soul after Wyatt’s barbecue.

My attempt to kick the hand away worked, but as soon as I tried to swim off, it tangled in my hair. No pain, of course. I just couldn’t break free. I struggled, trying to turn around to take a good look at my attacker’s face. He dragged me into the depths. Darkness tumbled around me, dancing in front of my face, like the sea wanted to warn me.

Then, something slammed over my chest, and I burned all over.

Grinding, searing pain.

I never felt anything like it, but if I had to compare it to something screwed epically horrible, it was like having a cow brand dug into my skin by a masochistic serial killer.

I couldn’t move. Whatever he put over my heart paralyzed me, and I floated listlessly, wanting to scream from the torture. My heartbeat started to drag. First, an extra ten seconds between each beat then fifteen.

Music tore through the water. The song was an earsplitting threat that sent the darkness around us spinning and roaring into a shadowy tempest. My attacker struggled against the fierce pull and relaxed his grip over my chest. He yanked my hair one last time before completely releasing me and kicking against the back of my legs to escape.

I sank down. Thin arms caught me and wrapped around my waist. My senses were hazy, but as I peered up at my rescuer, I couldn’t mistake the bright skin that was so similar to mine or the strands of gold floating around Lorelei’s face. And I certainly couldn’t deny the rage in her emerald eyes.

Great.

She waited until we were far from the sea to rant at me. “What do you think you were doing?” She flung open the door to her cottage, pointing for me to go in. I shook my head. Bony fingers dug into my elbow as she pushed me inside. She didn't let me speak before she headed to the kitchen. A few seconds later, she came back with a glass of water.

“Drink,” she ordered.

I sat on the edge of a chair, not really caring if the beads of water trickling from my hair and clothes ruined the golden fabric. Obviously, she could afford a new one. She disappeared again, returning with a towel and a bath robe.

I didn't feel comfortable with changing clothes in front of her. But I started toward the bathroom, and she gave me the vicious, siren stink eye, so I had no other choice. Her mouth flew open when I slammed my heavy clothes on the coffee table.

"Charlotte," she said, her voice a low, dangerous whisper, "you were singing a Lure." It wasn't a question.

"I was attacked," I pointed out. I flopped onto the couch, sliding my fingers beneath the terry cloth robe to rub my chest. My skin burned. "Can you explain *this*? Because you never told me *this* would happen."

She bent over me and knocked my hand away. I totally felt violated. She tilted her head to the side as she rubbed the pink spiral-shaped mark. Sighing, she pulled away and sat next to me. I scrunched my nose when she shook her hair loose and wrung it out into a decorative bowl on the side table.

"You did a *Lure* Charlotte. The hunter comes after us at will, but you provoked him. You were practically asking to be attacked."

I wanted to confront her for saying I asked to be attacked, but I couldn't piece together a coherent argument. Instead, I numbly said, "A siren hunter? You're joking, right?"

Pursing her lips together, she shook her head. "No."

I pushed to my feet and backed away from her. Not that it helped. I just refused to be anywhere near Lorelei. She freaked me out. "Is that all you're going to say? Don't you think I deserve, I don't know, an explanation?"

She played with the clinging silk fabric of her dress. When I started tapping my feet in frustration, she sighed. "My sisters and I became sirens because we made a mistake."

Like that told me anything! I threw my hands up in frustration. "Demeter?" At least, that's what one of the books claimed. The Goddess of Fertility made the sirens after they lost her kid. On the other hand, my library research also concluded that sirens had wings and talons. The last time I checked, I still had toes.

"Yes. Persephone was kidnapped under our watch. Needless to say Demeter was furious. She cursed us but only because she wasn't allowed to kill us.

I rolled my eyes. The more I heard about the gods, the more I wanted to vomit.

"Hades felt indebted to us because if it wasn't for our stupidity, Persephone wouldn't have become his wife. He offered us a deal: guide the souls and receive protection. We accepted and he spoke with

the other gods—she can't directly hurt us."

"But wasn't Persephone returned? And isn't Hades like . . . well, the devil?"

Lorelei lifted an eyebrow. Her head drooped again, and her shoulders began shaking. Was she crying? She looked up, and I realized she was laughing. At me. Because she thought I was a joke.

"I'm glad to see I amuse you," I hissed.

She held up a hand as her giggles died down. What the hell was wrong with her? *I* should be the one laughing. After all, she was the one listing off names I'd only heard on the TV show *Hercules* up until a few weeks before.

She was like a walking, talking epic poem.

"Sorry. You just shouldn't believe everything you read. It's horribly incorrect."

Glaring, I slid my body down the wall and sat slumped on the floor. "Can you just finish telling me or do I need to ask Francesca? You know, since she's the logical sister."

That stopped her ignorant giggles. She stiffened at the mention of her bitchy sister. "Persephone was *never* returned, and Hades isn't the devil. When Demeter made us, she knew precisely how to make us suffer. How to make us crazy. Our mother was the Muse of Singing, and all six of us loved music. Imagine our surprise when we were banished to an island *singing* against our will to lure sailors to their death."

"And this relates to me being attacked *how*?"

She sucked her cheeks in, making me feel like every single questioned I asked her was completely stupid. "We eventually learned how to fight the urge to Lure. When we escaped the island, it only made Demeter furious. She hired a man—the brother of one of the sailors who died because of us—to track us and kill us."

"A mortal?"

"Yes. She blessed a tiny shell. The hunter uses it to . . ." She noticed the look on my face and huffed. "I realize it sounds ridiculous, but it's the truth. Every century, there's a new hunter. I've been fortunate enough to escape each one I've encountered."

She dipped the neckline of her dress to show me the scar over her heart. It looked like a scarlet target. Mine looked pathetic and faint compared to hers.

"He came for you after you moved here?" I asked.

Her mouth thinned into a tight line as she stroked the scar. "1773."

"Huh?"

"The year. In Germany. I fell for a man and didn't realize he was the hunter until he was sucking my life away. At least I kept one decent thing from my time living in the Rhine Valley—my name."

I didn't know what to say. I mean, I was seriously at a loss for words as I watched her drum her fingers and stare down at her lap. I couldn't imagine discovering that the guy I cared about wanted to kill me. My feelings for Lorelei were mixed, but I didn't want to see her suffer. Seeing her in pain was like kicking a cocker spaniel or taking chocolate from a first-grader.

I opened my mouth to stutter an apology. She stopped me. "It's fine, really. It was over two hundred years ago. I'll get dressed so I can take you home. Cammy will be wondering where I—" She cringed, but I knew exactly what she was about to say.

My brother was the reason why she was dressed up. No wonder he was MIA when I went home earlier. Lorelei must have been out with him when she heard my Lure. I wondered if she left him at one of the expensive restaurants on the waterfront twiddling his thumbs with a gigantic bill he couldn't afford.

Because I wasn't too sure if I could take a car ride with her then have to endure watching the inevitable snuggle routine, I decided to go the Golden Boy route. "Don't worry about it. I think I'm going to go see Wyatt," I said. I definitely didn't appreciate how her face went from pinched and irritated to beaming in a matter of seconds.

"That's wonderful."

At times, Lorelei was a Stepford freak.

I took a deep breath before asking her about Wyatt. "When—*if*—I kiss him, what am I doing to him?" If she had made me immortal with a kiss, I was terrified of what my lips were capable of.

She laughed. "You can't turn a man into a siren, Charlotte. It's perfectly fine to kiss him." I started to speak, but she answered my question as if reading my mind. "Just be careful because too much contact makes the boys weak."

That explained why Golden Boy shivered when we touched sometimes.

She lent me some of her clothes to wear—a pair of cotton shorts and a t-shirt. Before I left the cottage, she stopped me, grasping my wrist. "Do *not* use the Lure. Guide the souls without distraction, and you'll be fine. And *don't* interfere. It's an easy way to anger Demeter."

I was under the impression Demeter was pissed off, anyway. I nodded, stepping onto the stone walkway. As I prepared to leave, a thought hit me. I turned to face her. "You said there were six original sirens. And you told me before that you made another. How many are left?"

"Three: You, Francesca, and myself."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Four dead sirens wasn't too bad. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself. Then I realized her sisters might have had changed dying girls out of pity. Girls like me. I would have been lying if I didn't admit I was frightened of the hunter.

Wyatt was outside. I stood watching him for a few moments, debating with myself. He wasn't my type, yet I was still drawn to him. I *wanted* to be around him, so much that when I didn't see him, he was constantly in my thoughts. I had the lightheaded sensation I used to get from chugging beer.

"I'm still messed up from the hunter," I whispered.

Right.

Wyatt tossed a football with two other guys I immediately recognized as the friends he brought to Romano's the night we met. A strong part of me needed to see him, but I refused to put up with bullshit. Determined to creep back to Lorelei's unnoticed, I turned around.

"Charlotte?" he yelled.

If I kept walking, he would think it was someone else, and I wouldn't seem so damn clingy.

But Wyatt ran fast and caught up with me. He held up a finger as he tried to catch his breath. I flicked my gaze on his friends. I could see them nudging each other, even in the dark.

He straightened. A lopsided grin slunk across his moist face. I couldn't decide whether he looked good or just plain annoying. "Can't stay away, huh?" He linked his fingers together behind his head.

"Don't flatter yourself, Golden," I snapped, spinning in the sand. My inner-voice yelled at me, though, and urged me to admit how much I'd thought of him. As usual, I ignored it.

His smile broadened. He closed his fingers around my wrist, pulling me to him. I contemplated knocking his hand away as it crept to my shoulders then to my hair. He dropped his lips to my temple and stood quiet for a moment. I could hear him drawing in air—slow, deep breaths. And even though the night air was humid, I shivered. His heart sped up.

I envied him for his heartbeat.

"It's okay if you couldn't stay away," he whispered. "I don't want you to."

I yanked away, my hands groping the spot on my neck he'd touched. When I saw him, I pushed all my problems to the back of my mind. I felt disgusted with myself because his friends were watching. Irritated because I looked forward to seeing him now. Livid because

he hadn't kissed me.

"Some people may call that stalkerish, you know?" I nodded toward his friends. "Didn't think you'd have company."

He shrugged and caught my hand in his. His head cocked to the side as if he was waiting for me to berate him. After a few moment of silence, he said, "Nothing else going on so they drove in from Boston. Come on."

When I stayed rooted in my spot, he tugged me to himself. I could have made up some lame excuse and refused to go. Instead, I shuffled beside him. Dealing with his friends as a waitress had been simple.

And dealing with Wyatt when I thought he was nothing more than a whiny Summer Boy had also been easy. Now I was his . . . *friend.*

"I like you in bright colors," he said, interrupting my thoughts.

Translation: *I think my June Cleaver mom would approve of seeing you in something other than black and gray.*

"Thanks."

We reached his friends. They sat in the sand, guzzling high-priced beer. I wanted to tell them the cheap stuff did the trick, but I decided against it. Wyatt's parents must not have been home because only the deck light was on.

"Charlotte, this is Ethan and that's Justin," he said, nodding to the dark-haired boy first then to the taller guy. His friends smirked at each other and did some type of eye twitch I figured was their version of winking.

"What the hell is that look for?" I asked impatiently.

Justin, the paler of the two, flushed. "We've had to hear about you all night. Didn't think he'd call you." He sounded almost irritated—like I interrupted sacred boy bonding hour or something. Ethan was more playful about the situation because he kept snickering and making whip noises.

I wasn't even aware people did that anymore.

I avoided meeting Wyatt's intense blue stare, though I could feel his eyes burning into the side of my face. Justin and Ethan exchanged goofy looks again. I was dying to know what Golden Boy said to them.

Sinking down onto the sand, I wrapped my arms around my knees. Wyatt slid beside me. He rested his hand on my thigh. His touch against my bare skin sent a jolt running through me. It was a numbing mixture of good and awkward, and I didn't push him away. "Talking 'bout me behind my back, huh?" I asked, tilting my head back to stare at him.

Ethan snorted. "It was pretty pathetic, too." He didn't say anything else because Wyatt shot him a murderous glare. Instead, he shoved a beer in my direction and frowned when I played with the tab. "You don't drink?"

"I can drink your Abercrombie-wearing ass under the table." I expected him to flip out, but they all laughed. He gave Wyatt a thumbs-up. I bit my tongue so I wouldn't tell him to shove his seal of approval.

It didn't take long for Ethan and Justin to get wasted. Each time I teased them, they drank more, determined to prove me wrong. Just as I predicted, they were lightweights. I was glad when they stumbled to the deck to pass out; their sex jokes were annoying.

"So you were talking about me?" I asked again. Wyatt slid behind me, draping his arms around my shoulders. His fingers brushed against my chest and the painful wound over my heart. I winced, but he didn't notice. He was too distracted by my moist skin, shimmering under the faint moonlight.

"Wondered what you were doing; funny you always show up whenever I do that."

I rolled around and faced him. Before I could stop myself, I dragged his mouth to mine. The drunken idiots hooted from the deck. Neither of us cared. And as much as I hated to admit it, I thought about kissing Golden Boy. Dreamt about it in more vivid clarity than any nightmare—any *dream*—I'd ever had. "You shouldn't wonder so much," I murmured, my lips still close to his.

We kissed one more time, and then he spoke, his breath was ragged. "Trial run?" he asked, echoing my response from the night I first kissed him. His fingertips flitted over my lower lip. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

Flicking my tongue over the spot he'd touched, I asked, "Huh?"

"I heard you singing tonight. Or maybe I imagined it . . . that foreign song you sang the morning I caught you in that wet t-shirt." He closed his eyes, probably to recapture some dirty image of me standing in his backyard in drenched clothes.

I shuddered.

***

When I discovered I was a siren, I thought that my strange nightmares were finished. I knew my job. I accepted being an immortal.

So I didn't understand why Mom sat beside me on a rock. Her eyes were the only part of her that was still the same. The rest frightened me . . . and assured me she wasn't real. She wore the same clothes from the night she died, but now, they were shredded and stained with a mixture of seaweed and sand.

"You know this is an illusion," she whispered. She cocked her head so far to one side that I thought it might spin around. I nodded, too afraid to speak, even more terrified of waking up.

She lifted a strand of damp hair. Her hand was pale like the rest of her body, but as light from the rising sun touched it, it turned gray. She noticed me gawking and pursed her lips together at the sight of her fingers. “I need you, Char, more than ever.”

I fought the urge to cringe as her hand stroked the side of my face. Her touch felt like liquid and ice and fire. *She said this is an illusion.* Still, my throat tightened because it felt so real.

I finally found my voice. “I can’t believe I’m dreaming about you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I never said it was a dream, Char. But you should open your eyes now and figure out how to help.”

What was she talking about? Before I could force words past my lips, she gripped my chin, focusing my eyes on the sun beaming overhead. What did the light have to do with my dream? I looked back at her for an explanation, but she was like Brian and Mr. Sidney, like all the souls I guided.

Liquid.

She sank into the sea. Her voice floated back up at me.

“Help.”

***

“Help what? Are you okay?”

Blue eyes and dimples hovered above my face. Wyatt stood so that I could sit up in the sand. He held out his hands and pulled me up toward him.

Our bodies were entirely too close. So close that I could smell the soap he used. His palms slid down my shoulders, down the front of my damp tank top. He stopped at the fabric by my waist, digging his fingers into it. He didn’t repeat his question. He didn’t even breathe.

“You are . . .” He touched his forehead against mine, like he was trying to find the perfect word to describe me. Our eyes locked. My grip tightened on his elbows.

“I'm what?”

“Different. And in a wet shirt again.” He backed away from me. Our fingers interlocked as we walked through the sand to his backdoor. I hesitated when he tried to lead me inside. “What?”

“I’m sure your mom already thinks I’m weird. No pants, see?” I said, pointing at my bare legs.

He grinned. “Oh, I noticed.” The look was almost wicked and definitely sexy. I needed to slap myself for letting my mind constantly wander to his good looks. “I’m glad you’re concerned about my mother’s opinion, but they’re still out of town.”

I shouldn’t be doing this, I thought as he led me through the kitchen and up the stairs. I didn’t turn around, though. Because I was weak. My heartbeat dragged loudly, like it was warning me that my attraction to him was a horrible idea.

Wyatt's bedroom was like the rest of the house, neutral and plush except for the bright orange comforter on his bed. “I bet your mom cleans it for you,” I said. He closed the door. A towel hung over his headboard, and he crossed the room, pulled it off, and tossed it at me.

“I clean my own room.” He lay on the bed and watched me dry off. The light streaming through the wood blinds caught his eyes. I kept my attention on a pair of gym shorts balled up in the corner so he wouldn’t see that his stare was affecting me.

Yeah, coming up here was definitely a dumb idea.

I couldn’t take the heat of his eyes any longer. It was too dangerous. “Can you stop?” I snapped.

Golden Boy was becoming bold. He didn’t look away. “You’re beautiful.”

My feet dragged me over to him. I eased down on the bed until our faces were inches apart. “Don’t you think I’m strange?”

“A little,” he said, inhaling deeply.

Mom’s withered face flashed in my mind. “A little?” My voice trembled, and he cupped my chin.

“Okay, a lot. But there’s no point in asking about it. If I asked you about your sleepwalking, would you answer me?”

He was right. All-knowing eyes tortured me for another few seconds, then he slid off the bed. “Here.” He handed me a t-shirt and pants from his dresser. “Soon you’ll have more of my stuff than your own.”

“I dreamt about my mom,” I said. “She sat beside me. We—we talked and it just felt so *real*.” I hugged his clothes to my chest. My eyes dropped to my bare leg, still golden from the salt and water. I hadn’t planned on sharing my dream. Telling him so much wasn’t allowed, at least by my rules. Heat continued to pour from his stare, making me feel naked despite the wet clothes I wore.

“You dream about her a lot?”

I shrugged, not daring to look up. He was quiet as he crossed the bedroom. My throat was suddenly tight and dry, my skin ached, and I almost wished for the salt water that always made everything better. “In the beginning, I blamed her, my dad.”

Kyle.

I made myself face him, positive the fake, painful smile straining my face would break at any moment. “But sometimes, it gets to me. And I wonder if I could have done something. If things would have gone differently if I’d just been . . . I don’t know, *there.* Then it’s not everyone else’s fault anymore.”

His fingertips brushed away imaginary tears, ones that wouldn’t fall because of what I was. Soft lips hovered right by my hair. “Don’t,” he whispered. No other words. He didn’t ask me more about my mom or

my dreams or the sleepwalking claims. Not that it mattered. That one word and the way he touched my face made it okay. Being with him made the issues in my life—the new and the old—seem less daunting.

When had this happened? When had I stopped caring so much about what part of town he lived in? When did I quit caring that I had no idea what *we* were anymore?

Whatever we'd become, I didn't want it to end.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sophie was floating again.

I regretted bringing Wyatt around her and Andy. Her brief, seven-day fling with Jason Nelson was over, and she was handling the sting of breakup the only way she knew how. I should have been glad my friends were speaking. I wasn't, because I was so embarrassed. She slurred. She giggled. And finally, her head flopped to her chest. Wyatt was quiet, like he was just waiting for her to start foaming at the mouth so he could call an ambulance.

I felt pretty screwed up for thinking like that about my best friend.

Andy's choice of restaurant also contributed to my foul mood. He picked the Sunshine Café, and lucky for him, Nicola was our gag-worthy waiter again.

"There's a party a few houses down from Andy's tonight," Sophie said, carving her initials in her cherry pie with a spoon. The filling oozed onto her plate.

I chugged my glass of water to stifle a rude remark. Swallowing hard, I shrugged. "And?"

"You and William should come."

Was she kidding? Wyatt shifted beside me then dumped another packet of creamer into his coffee. Great. He would never want to come around my friends again because Sophie offended him.

"Wyatt, Sophie. His name is Wyatt," I said.

She slouched, rolled her eyes, and took up playing with her food again.

Andy cast a pleading stare between Wyatt and me. "I'm so sorry, guys," he mouthed.

Nicola slunk to our table, a wide smile spread across her face. "Can I get you *guys* anything else?" I sulked at her emphasis on the word 'guys'. Andy had to be jealous of the attention she showed Wyatt. I mean, even I was admittedly piqued about it.

"More water?" I asked.

"You playing volleyball next year?"

"Did I play last year?"

She ignored me and instead focused her saccharine smile back on Wyatt and Andy. "You guys sure you don't need anything?" Wyatt opened another packet of creamer then balled up the wrapper and tossed it on the table. He didn't look at her. Andy ordered dessert and just before Nicola left, she gave Sophie a pitying look.

Golden Boy tilted his head to one side then the other, trying to look at Sophie's face. "Is she breathing?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "We're used to this."

Golden Boy blinked, but he didn't say anything. No cocky remarks. No excessive flirting. He was definitely freaked out and pissed. By the time a group of kids from school—Nicola's friends—came into the restaurant, I was ready to go home. Wyatt's mood darkened when I offered to pay for my own meal.

"I can pay, Charlotte."

I grunted, pushing the ten dollar bill across the table anyway. "Thanks, Wyatt. But I think I can manage an eight dollar salad." He threw up his hands and stalked from the table.

"Char, seriously, I'm so sorry," Andy said. He poked Sophie a few times. She giggled.

Wyatt was the primary source of my irritation, not my friends. He obviously wasn't impressed with Sophie. He was rude tonight, and his sulking was utterly out-of-character from the boy that always occupied my thoughts.

But Sophie's life didn't suck *that* much.

"I'll call you tomorrow," I said.

Someone at my classmates' table made a comment about my 'date' as I passed by followed by someone else whispering a remark where 'mom' was audible. Wyatt waited in his truck, wearing a stony expression and blasting Three Days Grace. I slid into my seat. His eyes didn't leave the dashboard.

For the first five minutes of the drive, he refused to talk to me. I expected him to apologize for acting like an antisocial dick in the restaurant. Maybe I glorified him, giving him way too much credit. "Don't you think your friend needs help?" he finally asked.

Don't punch him! "Look, she pops pills. I've tried to help her for two years."

"That wasn't just pill popping. That was . . . pathetic," he sputtered.

I wanted to tell him that it hurt me when Sophie lost herself in a hazy stupor. That it terrified me to imagine her with the same fate as Mom.

But those were words I couldn't bring myself to say.

"She's my best friend, and you're shallow, Golden Boy. So just shut the hell up." Each syllable was emphasized, my voice growing louder until I almost screamed.

"Shallow?" he demanded. "You think I'm shallow? You've got to be kidding. You think you're the only one who has to deal with shit?"

"I never said that."

He gripped the steering wheel as if he were steadying himself. "Yeah, well, that's the way it seems."

"Why do you even care?"

Wyatt whirled on me, but his face stayed surprisingly calm. "Bet you didn't know my sister's been in rehab all summer!" he yelled.

“That she spent two months of my freshman year hidden away in a home for druggies. But I guess not, right? Because I’m golden, my life shines.” The last few words faded to a heartbreaking whisper.

My chest ached as I digested his words. I’d never seen him so vulnerable. Or angry. Cautiously, I reached out and touched his forearm. He flinched. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m so, *so* sorry.”

Silence followed. I toyed with the strap of my seatbelt as I waited for him to speak to me. At last, he exhaled, “Char . . .” He pulled my hand into his, turned toward me, and offered a strained smile. He opened his mouth to say something else then his gaze slipped past my face. His eyes bugged.

A force slammed into the passenger side of the truck. My side.

The Dodge spun around in a complete circle as the airbag crushed against my face. I heard the sickening snap of bones, and I didn’t know who the sound belonged to. Horns—both Wyatt’s and others around us—wailed, but I could care less.

He might be dead.

Frantically, I clawed at the thick material clouding my vision until I saw his face. His airbag hadn’t deployed, and he lay slumped against the door. A jagged gash ran across his forehead. His eyes were closed.

But I felt his heartbeat throb over the buzzing in my ears. I didn’t realize that the passenger side of the car was burning, that my leg was on fire, until after the foul and heavy scent of fuel assaulted me. My eyes stayed locked on my burning skin for a moment. I dug my fingers into the leather seat, watching my body extinguish the fire. I reached out and swallowed when I touched the damp mist that clung to my thigh.

Wyatt muttered something incoherent as I crawled toward him. I knew it wasn’t smart to move him, but I jiggled his door open and pushed him out of the truck.

His truck was a lost cause. Flames engulfed it while other drivers took out their phones to call for help. I only cared about Wyatt. He pulled his eyes open and blinked, staring into my face and regarding me with a confused expression. “I’m sorry.”

Then his head dropped to my lap, and he sank into an unconscious dream world.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"We need to examine you, Charlotte," Dr. Morris said again. His lips thinned as I rolled my eyes. Ever since the paramedics rolled me into the ER an hour ago, I refused care.

"He's right," Dad said. He was at work when he got the call about the accident, so he met me as soon as I came through the doors.

"I'm fine." I kept my eyes glued to the curtain, hoping and praying Lorelei would hurry and show. She was in Boston with Cam when I called her. If Dr. Morris checked my vitals, things could get messy.

"An 18-wheeler slammed into your side of your boyfriend's truck. The impact should have killed you, but yo—"

"Is he okay?"

"Broken arm and cuts and bruises," Dad said, sighing. "Charlotte, can you just cooperate for once in your life. How do you know you don't have broken bones or a concussion?"

That would be hard considering I could probably jump off a 12-story building and get right back up. Too bad I couldn't tell the good doctor or my father that.

Lorelei swept through the curtain with Cam in tow. She rushed over and played the part of doting . . . whatever the hell she was. I glared at her as she brushed the hair from my forehead and fussed over me.

"You're like a magnet for trouble," Cam mumbled.

"And she's about to be grounded if she doesn't let Dr. Morris take a look!" Dad said.

Wasn't I *already* grounded?

Dr. Morris tapped his clipboard against his leg, demanding everyone's attention. "No more chitchat. We need to see what's going on with you, Charlotte." He took a step closer and held his stethoscope out.

I almost rolled off the squeaky cot. My gaze caught Lorelei's. She looked serene and totally at ease. *Right*, because exposing the fact neither of us could die was just peachy. As I argued with my family and Dr. Morris, she began to hum. Words—ancient and foreign and mesmerizing—flowed from her lips. She moved between the three men, keeping her eyes focused on me.

They were stoned in a matter of seconds. "I'll start on your release paperwork," Dr. Morris said. Wide-eyed, he shuffled from the area, yanking the curtain around the tiny stall.

"I want to see Wyatt," I told her.

Fifteen minutes later, I was released. Lorelei convinced Dad to go back to work and asked Cam to wait in the car while I found Wyatt's room. He was being kept overnight for monitoring. I almost didn't

want to enter because I heard the tearful conversation straining from the cracked door. It budged a little when I leaned against it.

"Come in," Mrs. Anderson sniffled.

I grimaced, counted to twenty, and walked in. Both of Wyatt's parents—and a man who looked familiar—crowded around his bed. They were dressed up, and I remembered Wyatt saying his parents were attending a benefit dinner.

I wiggled my fingers in an awkward greeting. "Hi."

"I thought I killed you," he croaked. I shuffled by his bed. He looked horrible and beat up.

Was that why he'd apologized? He had thought I was going to die. I swallowed as I imagined what would have happened if the truck struck his side instead of mine. "I'm fine. My brother and his girlfriend are here to take me home." I couldn't get the image of him in the truck out of my head. My stomach twisted.

He shook his head and immediately grabbed his neck, wincing. "They aren't keeping you?"

"Nope, um, I'm good to go."

His face was blank as he stared at the cast on his left arm. "I don't understand. I heard your neck snap, Charlotte! You were on *fire*."

Oh, hell no. His parents shared an uneasy look between one another. I took a deep, unnecessary breath and managed a laugh. "No, you fainted after you hit your head." I was glad I wore a hospital gown over my clothes. Otherwise, he would see the hole charred into my jeans. He would have called me out for the freak I was.

"Men don't faint, young lady." I turned to face his parents' friend. "You are?" he asked.

"Charlotte Brewer."

His lips curled into a sneer. Something flickered in his brown eyes—rage and maybe disgust. For a moment, I thought I found the siren hunter. He blinked, and I tilted my head when he stared at me with slate blue eyes.

What was up with his eyes?

Then he spoke, and I realized it was much worse than a seashell-wielding psychopath. "Kenneth Sanford, I'm handling public relations for Mr. Anderson."

Sanford? As in Kyle Sanford's father. *Awesome*. Could the immortal piece of shit known as my life get any worse?

***

The need to guide pulled me out of my bed at 2:30 in the morning. I crept through the house, past the sofa in the living room where my dad slept. My newest summer chaos rocked him, and he swore up and down that he had no plans of loosening my leash again. Instead of doing my job quickly and bailing, I walked the beach first and

pictured Wyatt in his hospital room. *"I heard your neck snap,"* he had said just before every drop of color drained from his face.

Tapping my fingers on my neck, I sagged down on the remains of a sand castle. Wyatt just needed to be convinced that he imagined the sound of my bones breaking, the sight of fire dancing across my leg. I would remind him that he passed out. That I pulled him from the car. Making him believe me would be simple, right?

When I squeezed my eyes together, though, nothing seemed easy. I saw his bruised, honest face, and I shivered because it was impossible to misread the expression. He was challenging me. *Tell me the truth, Charlotte.*

"Would you really believe me?" I whispered. Reluctantly, I opened my eyes and let the image of him go. Not that I could focus on my own thoughts—one of the souls was in the middle of an afterlife breakdown. She screamed and pleaded, and the longer I ignored her, the louder she screeched. I slipped off my flip-flops and stalked toward the waves. So much for peace and time alone.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I waited for the soul to come to me. They always met me but some were more hesitant than the others. Tonight, the soul hid. And it pissed me off. I was in no mood to deal with an unsure dead chick.

I tried to sound sweet. I traveled through the darkness waiting for a watery hand to grasp mine or to face a stream of questions coming from an unmoving mouth. Neither happened.

My chest tingled a warning. Was I floating into a trap? What if the hunter had some way to echo a soul? But then the sea changed shape and the soul appeared. I *knew* her—the crooked nose and the full lips. The face in front of me was an older, liquid version of my own.

Mom.

"*Help me, Char."*

I reached out to touch her cheek. She burst into millions of tiny jets. Holding my breath, I waited to see if she'd come back. It took forever, but she formed behind me this time.

"*You have to save me*."

"How?" I turned and was too afraid to touch her again. Too scared to see her go.

"*I'm stuck here.*"

My hand hurt as I extended it to her, and I instantly knew it was against the rules. I couldn't take her where the good souls went. "I'll find a way to help you," I promised.

She nodded and disappeared again. I held my hand out, letting the frigid rush flow against it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I gave myself almost an entire day to think about Mom's plea before I confronted Lorelei. Because I was trying to learn control and stop being such a hot head. When I locked myself in my room, Dad seemed concerned. He must have thought I was still shaken by the car accident. In reality, it was the last thing on my mind.

As I paced across the hardwood floor and chugged gallons of salt water to calm my nerves, I freaked out. If *I* couldn't guide Mom—like the rest of the good souls—that meant Lorelei would have to.

Was my mom's soul really so dark and twisted that it wasn't good enough for the vortex of swirling, bright lights? And if it was good enough, why would Lorelei make her suffer? Why make her linger?

I convinced myself that waiting to see Lorelei would force some of my anger to evaporate, push it under the surface. Bottle it up. Instead, my frustration amplified with each passing hour. I was fuming by the time I stalked into her cottage to demand answers.

She wasn't inside the house. I found her standing on The Lighthouse tower, gazing out at the sea. "Char," she whispered. She sounded defeated. And miserable. She didn't even turn around—it was as if she expected me.

"Help her." I jabbed a shaky finger down at the waves rolling against the rocks. A storm was coming, and tonight the sea mirrored my violent mood. Lorelei's spine was rigid. Her shoulders jerked up in an awkward angle. "Are you deaf? *Help* her."

She spun to look at me. The frown on her face was sympathetic, but I didn't need her pity. I *needed* her to fix things. She held up her palms, preparing to give an explanation. I refused to listen.

"Obviously, you know why I'm here. Is this some kind of messed up way for you to get closer to my family or do you hold some kind of grudge against her because she has a soul?"

Her hand flew to her chest as if I held a lit match to her skin. She rubbed the spot over her heart and stared down at her frilly clothes. When she glanced at me again, the pity in her green eyes was gone. She looked lethal, despite her delicate appearance, and I reminded myself of how many people she killed over the years. She turned back to the ocean.

"It's not that simple," she said through clenched teeth.

Nothing ever was with her. "But you knew exactly why I came here, right? Even before I said anything. How?" I leaned against the railing and glared down at my tennis shoes. The wind swept wisps of Lorelei's hair into my face.

I slid away from her.

"We're connected. After all, you're a siren because of me."

At the moment, the thought of being linked to her was the equivalent of being gouged in the eyeball. Gruesome *and* painful. "Well that's great to know," I snapped. Combing my hand through my hair, I pressed my ear in the direction of the waves, hoping to hear Mom again.

No luck.

Lorelei sighed then sidled closer. She reached out to stroke my back. "Your mother is in limbo right now, Charlotte."

What was that supposed to mean? I always thought of limbo as being a vacant, white space where semi-bad people floated around flailing their arms and legs. My mom couldn't be *that* bad, yet she was stuck in watery hell.

"Then get her out," I said.

Shaking her head, she squeezed her eyes shut and rested her elbows on the railing. "I can't."

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "Because Thelxiope is the only one with the authority to decide what happens to the undecided souls."

Francesca. Just thinking about Little Miss Hollywood made me ill. Why would anyone that self-centered and selfish be given the power to choose how worthy a person's soul was? "Well then tell her to do it."

"She hasn't—she *won't*—do her job."

I recalled the conversation I eavesdropped on the afternoon I met Francesca—the same day I discovered I was immortal. *"They're there for a reason. They can wait a bit longer while I decide what to do with them,"* she said.

"How long has it been since she's guided a soul?" I asked.

Lorelei walked toward the door leading into the building. Her movements were slow and calculated. I knew I wouldn't be happy with her answer. "We should go to the cottage and talk."

"How *long*?"

She glanced over her shoulder, grimacing. "Not for the last seventy years." I felt numb and confused, but I shuffled behind her down the narrow steps then outside toward the cottage.

I refused to drink the water she gave me after I sank down on her couch. I didn't want to clear my clouded mind. I needed to feel, no matter how upset I was.

"Can't you make her?"

She sat on the floor, resting her back against an arm chair. She brought her knees to her chest, and I focused my gaze on the bare feet poking out from beneath her skirt. I knew exactly what her sigh meant. "No."

"Why won't she do her job then?"

"I don't know, Charlotte. Fear. Laziness. I can't tell you what inspires her anymore."

"So my mom is just stuck down there because some lazy, selfish monster is too scared to do anything about it?" I shook my head, shooting to my feet. I considered picking up the statuette—the ancient sculpture of the musical girl—Lorelei cherished and throwing it out the window. But Francesca broke things. I was nothing like her because I did my job. "Maybe Demeter will catch up with her."

Lorelei glared at me. "That's not fair."

I snorted, whacking myself in the forehead. "Right, and it's okay if she makes souls wait while she tries to make up her mind about what to do."

"Charlotte, if I could help your mother, I would. No amount of pleading with my sister will encourage her to respond any faster. I've tried. You have to understand that her life hasn't been pleasant. Thel—*Francesca* has an unhealthy love-hate relationship with immortality."

I couldn't imagine how Francesca's life could suck. She was filthy rich and it was nearly impossible to kill her. On the other hand, up until Mom had called out to me, soul-guiding and immortality had just been inconvenient. Now it was unbearable.

Easing down beside her, I crossed my legs in front of me. "How do I get rid of it?"

"Excuse me?"

"The day you told me I was a siren you started to mention how to become regular again. I need to know. Because after I free my mom, I want out."

She turned to me, and her eyes widened. Silence followed as she repeatedly raked her teeth over her upper lip. "It's not so easy."

Ugh. Was she serious? I was getting so sick of constantly hearing her say that to me. *It's difficult. It's very hard.* I didn't care how hard it was. Whatever it was, I was willing to try it. "Try me."

"True love."

"Huh?"

"When Demeter changed us, she promised we could regain our souls and have normal lives. She swore it would be simple. The only thing we needed to do was find true love with a mortal man. For the first several years, it was impossible because we were banished to our island, Anthemoessa. Once I was free, I believed it would be take me a year, maybe two. I was hopeful, *stupid*, and I thought it would happen quickly.

"As the centuries went by, I realized the difficulty. My relationships were always one-sided. Either the he'd be crazy about me or I would

love him. By the time I met Friedrich in Germany, I'd almost given up. I waited and waited to feel a regular heartbeat—to be normal. Of course, you know how that ended." Her smile was bittersweet, and she took a deep breath.

Friedrich must be the hunter she fell for. "What happened to him?" My voice was barely more than a whisper, and I was terrified of how she'd respond.

Her green eyes stormed over as she met my gaze. "I lured him and his crew. They all died by the rocks on the Rhine."

I shuddered. She spent so much time with my brother, and suddenly, her infatuation with him made sense. Was she using him to become mortal? And if he hurt her, what would happen to him? Would I have to identify his body after Lorelei had a siren hissy fit?

"Cam?"

"I already love him, Charlotte. If he loves me, I'll be very fortunate. If not, you don't have to worry about me killing him."

I gulped at the bluntness of her words. "But you're using him. You're probably messing with his mind to get him to care about you."

"It doesn't work like that. If I could just sing my way to love, I would have been mortal centuries ago. I would have had children. I would have died. Cam has to love me—something nobody else has ever done." Her voice was muffled, but I understood every word.

"Then why do you think he'll want you?" I demanded.

Her face crumpled. She pressed her forehead against her lap, and quiet gasping sounds escaped her throat.

Suddenly, I felt wretched. Her story sounded like a violent, twisted version of a VH1 reality show—*Siren of Love*—but I guess she deserved to be happy. I wasn't too sure if she would find what she was looking for with Cam, or how I would feel if she did. And I definitely didn't want them together before Lorelei forced Francesca to make a decision about Mom. I would make sure Lorelei wasn't happy until then.

I debated on whether or not to strike a compromise with her. My desire to end my mom's suffering won. "If you work on your sister, I'll infiltrate Cam's brain. It's easy, trust me," I said.

She lifted her face in surprise and nodded. Once again, I cringed at the thought of her and Cam. She was so ancient that she belonged in a museum somewhere, not with my brother.

"And I guess I'll have to make someone love me." Love scared me more than being a siren. More than siren hunters.

Because I wasn't convinced true love existed.

***

Wyatt was avoiding me. The hospital released him two days after the accident—yesterday—but he hadn't contacted me or answered my

messages.

He just wants to spend time with his family.

I felt like I was lying to myself every time those words crept into my brain. Occasionally, I reassured myself out loud. The only thing that took my mind off him was Dad presenting me with an at home drug test he bought at the pharmacy. He claimed he only had my best interest at heart, which I was sure he did. Still, it sucked that he treated me like a druggie just because I was in a car accident.

"I hate to do this, Char," he said grimly as he opened the bathroom door and pointed inside.

Yeah, whatever. I jerked the plastic cup from his outstretched hand and rolled my eyes. "This is stupid. You should just go ask Rob for the results from my mouth swab." While I was in the bathroom, I listened to him rant about my inability to stay out of trouble. He brought up summer school and The Lighthouse. Hearing about my downfalls on a daily basis was irritating. Dad wasn't standing at the door when I came into the hallway, and I found him in my room, looking under the mattress.

Did he know that I would never hide anything there?

Apparently he did, because he pried up a loose floorboard and looked in the place where I used to keep my diary when I was ten. "Just checking," he said after he couldn't find anything. He took the drug test from me, sat it on my dresser, and examined it. Gross. "Looks like you're good."

"Told you."

Dad started to leave my room, hopefully to throw away the waste of 40 bucks, but he turned around and asked, "What happened to the Jeep, Char?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. Guess one of the drunkards got key happy at Romano's."

I expected him to whine, but he laughed and shook his head. "You're having a rough summer, huh?"

I was a siren, the boy I wanted claimed he saw me on fire, and I was certain that Matt's girlfriend was a psycho bitch. Rough didn't even begin to describe my life. I had no way of changing two of my problems, but I confronted Matt about Eva at school later that morning.

"I can't see her doing that," he said, twirling a pen between his fingers.

"Well, can you ask her at least?"

"You know I will, Goose." He jotted something down on a piece of paper, folded it up, and slid it into his pocket. "Reminding myself," he explained.

Meaning, my issue was so insignificant that he needed a written

reminder? *Ugh, that isn't fair. He's trying to help and I'm being a jerk.* Still, I only said another six other words to him for the remainder of class: Can I borrow a pen. Thanks.

Sophie and Andy were waiting for me on the front swing when I got home. "For a crash victim, you're hard to get hold of," Andy said as I stomped up the three stairs leading to the porch.

I glared at him. I didn't think word of my accident would reach them so fast, but I guess I underestimated the Gloucester gossip. Even though my friends were my rock, I wanted to be alone to process the events of the weekend. I needed to be alone. "Haven't felt like talking."

Sophie flicked her cigarette into the bushes in front of the house. I pressed my lips into a tight line to avoid telling her to go pick the thing up. "It sucks hearing that your best friend was in a car accident from one of the guys on the rescue crew. By the way, he totally claimed you were on life support."

I stopped wiggling my key inside the lock and looked over my shoulder. "Oh my god, seriously?" She shook her head slowly, and I could have sworn her eyes were shimmery. They'd both probably worried like crazy about me. I wasn't sure if I deserved it, especially since I hadn't called to let them know I was okay. "I'm so, so sorry, guys."

"We believed it for about five seconds and then we called Cam. I'm pretty sure he was wasted, but he said you were okay," Andy said.

"How's your boyfriend?" Sophie sounded concerned. They followed me into the house. I threw my bag to the floor and shook my head at her.

"He's not my boyfriend."

"We saw him earlier."

I pretended not to be interested in Andy's words as I slid my shoes off and climbed onto the couch. I pushed my feet under a throw pillow. "Did you?"

Sophie nodded. She took her usual seat at the piano. Her eyes flitted to him, and she squeezed her face into a warning scowl. She giggled uneasily. "He was eating lunch with his family."

"Right. Spit it out. You guys suck at hiding stuff just as much as I fail at lying; there's something you're not telling me."

Andy shrugged. He plucked two of the stuffed bears—gifts Cam and I gave Mom on various holidays—from the top of the piano. He was silent as he forced the bears to make-out. Finally, he sighed.

"Kyle and his dad were with them."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When I failed to hear from Wyatt the first couple of days, I called him every five hours. Slightly obsessive, but I needed to talk to him. I pictured him, listening to my voicemails and calling me tragic and desperate. You know, *if* he listened. I quit trying after Wednesday night.

I busied myself with school and work in a weak attempt to coax my thoughts away from him. As soon as I stepped through the doors of Romano's on Saturday night, Rob whined. He complained because I was running twenty minutes behind and let me know how selfish I was for showing up late. "Time is money," he said. Then he pointed out that *Sophie* arrived fifteen minutes early. Because she was a model employee. A week ago, he'd have choked on his words if he witnessed her Sunshine Café episode.

Remember school clothes. Remember the fine you'll have after court. My financial situation was enough to keep me from quitting. Lorelei should pay for everything. She sung the stupid song that stuck me with the ticket to begin with, and since she was the owner of The Lighthouse, it technically wasn't trespassing.

Nevertheless, Lorelei's song was the reason why I knew my mother's fate, so I owed her.

I hid out in the storeroom, leafing through one of Kim's trashy tabloids. Francesca's frosty blue eyes glared at me from the cover, teasing me as I stared at her slumped against an actor. The headline said *Teen Starlet Smashed Again!*

I read about immortals partying hard in one of the books from the library, but Lorelei assured me that sirens are the exception. We only existed on salt water.

I considered ripping the magazine into hundreds of shreds, burning them and stuffing the remains in the garbage disposal, but it would not solve my problems. Confronting Francesca and forcing her to guide my mom's soul would. The door creaked open. I tossed the book to the floor and slid it beneath a shelf with my foot. I couldn't handle Rob's ranting. Not tonight.

Sophie shuffled in front of me, eyes downcast. "You're not still mad at me are you?" she asked.

I opened an oversized box of sugar packets and jammed a handful into my apron packet. "No." My voice sounded anything but friendly. Her lips twitched into a nervous frown.

I hurt her feelings.

The last thing I wanted was for *her* to start avoiding my calls, too. I could barely take the silent treatment from Golden Boy. "Okay, I am

still a little angry. Happy?"

"Sorry I acted like an idiot in front of your boyfriend."

"He's not my bo—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. The point is, I'm sorry. I was having a rough time," she said. She hung her head, a mass of curly ringlets shrouding her face. "Things didn't go so well with Jason."

Ugh . . . *Jason.* When I snorted, her head jerked up, and she looked utterly confused. Sophie was so used to me saying nothing when she attempted to offer an excuse for her random hookups. "You don't get it, do you?" Did she see what everyone around her noticed? The boys she picked only used her.

Did she see the way Andy looked at her?

"Huh?"

"Guess you don't." Rolling my eyes, I pushed past her. "Andy's crazy about you. And he's a good guy, don't you see that?" I twisted back around to face her. Slowly, her blue eyes enlarged as she registered my words. Andy might be upset with me for telling her, but she was my friend—the best one I had. "I got to get back to work . . . just think about what I said."

I opened the storeroom door and instantly knew Wyatt was in the restaurant. The summer scent I always claimed to hate battered my senses. Today, it took me to the beach, and I thought of the way he kissed me at his family's barbecue, the way he made me feel:

Safe.

I knew the rhythm of his heartbeat; it was the only one in the restaurant that pounded forty-nine beats each minute. Realizing that I could identify his heart in a room full of people shook me. I gripped the door frame, closed my eyes and wondered how many times his heart would drum when he saw me, if it would race out of fear or anticipation. Or both. My stomach tightened as I watched him study the menu that he knew well by now.

"Char?" Sophie's voice pulled me from the trance. Crossing her arms over her chest, she stared in Wyatt's direction then back at me. "Dude, I've never seen you act like this over a guy."

I shrugged. She snorted. "He's just a friend." She tried to get another word in, probably to point out that I was squinting, but I ignored her. I needed to talk to Wyatt. No doubt he'd question me about the accident, and I still wasn't sure how to respond. Once he looked at me, I would stutter like an idiot, then he would call me out for being a weird liar.

I slid past Sophie toward my section. The crescendo of Wyatt's heartbeat was like a magnet, drawing me closer until I stopped a few tables from where he sat.

He gazed down at the menu with his chin rested in his good hand.

He looked more casual—more normal—than I'd ever seen him, dressed in a plain white t-shirt and khaki shorts. My eyes focused on his cast, then at the stitches marring the right side of his forehead. I touched my own and squeezed my eyes shut as I felt smooth skin.

"Hey," I said.

He jumped and knocked his injured arm against the napkin dispenser. Wincing, he cursed aloud. A few people turned to glower. As he murmured a shaky apology, I noticed that his face was pale and dark shadows lurked beneath his eyes.

He looks wrecked.

He picked up the napkin dispenser and the pepper shaker, his hands still trembling. "How's it going?"

"Good, coffee or sprite this time?"

"Neither. I came to talk to you. Got a minute?" His voice broke, and he sounded . . . tired.

Oh, wonderful. I swallowed hard and stuffed my hand in my apron. The packets of sugar tumbled onto the floor. I was surprised when he knelt down to help me pick them up. As usual, he leaned close to me and inhaled, making my arms and spine tingle. But when his hand brushed mine, he recoiled and stared down at the scuffed floor.

I'm a monster. He's too weak to touch me.

"You want to go outside?" I stood and brushed dust from my dark pants. Even though I knew he couldn't help it, I was frustrated that my touch bothered him.

He nodded. As we passed the bar, Rob narrowed his eyes at me. The nasty look I cast in his direction turned his attention back to the customer he was talking with.

I followed Wyatt to a car—a black Nissan with thirty-day tags. "Nice," I said. I crossed my arms over my chest and squinted up at the sun. It played peek-a-boo from behind the clouds, but it seemed easier than staring him in the eye.

"Thanks. Dad got it for me yesterday."

Must be awesome to be ridiculously rich.

I squashed my jealousy and ran my hand across the hood. A little dirt smudged my fingers. "I liked the truck, too."

He twitched then shook his head. Like he needed to decide what to say. A variety of strange looks contorted his face as we stood in utter silence.

"I can't see you anymore," he whispered.

Maybe I was a dumbass or incredibly gullible, but I only expected him to grill me about the crash or mention that Kyle's dad hated me—because I was sure the jerk's dad despised my family. "What?"

"I just don't think it's a good idea to date you."

I pushed away from his car, laughing. My hand crept to my mouth

to stifle the giggles—harsh and bitter laughter that was just a little hysterical and made my chest ache.

His face scrunched and he shook his head from side to side. “What’s so funny?”

“We were never dating, Wyatt,” I blurted out.

He frowned. When he spoke, he didn’t acknowledge my comment. “I just think we should take some time apart.”

In other words, we wouldn’t see each other again. “Why?” I asked. Better question: *why* did I even care enough to ask?

His eyes lowered to his feet. I stared down with him, taking in his white sneakers. They were pristine—just like the rest of his life. I looked back up at him and noticed a subtle flush crawl up his neck. Realizing he wasn’t going to answer me, I laughed again. “I get it. Kenneth Sanford—or maybe even Kyle—told you about my mom.”

“You said she drowned.”

What a wimp.

“She *did* drown.”

He took a deep breath before gazing into my eyes. Confusion and irritation. And hurt. Why should he be hurt? I was the one getting dumped. “My dad doesn’t think it’s a good idea. You know, because of his run for the senate.”

I snorted. What a lame, tool of an excuse. Hadn’t he told me right before the crash that his sister was in rehab? But her situation was probably tidy now. She wasn’t disposable.

Not like me.

There were two types of Summer Boys: ones who just didn’t give a crap and did whatever they wanted and guys like Wyatt—boys who cared too much about what the people around him thought. Everything was about image for him, for his family. I didn’t care if I saw him again. He was leaving in a month.

I would forget about him after this last conversation.

If I don’t care then why is my head spinning?

I tried to fight my inner voice because I hated it for being right all the time. And I despised myself for hurting. “Why didn’t you just text me? It sucks that you wasted your time coming down here just to tell me that,” I said.

He stepped toward me, extending his hand. “Charlotte it’s not even like tha—”

I walked backward, shrugging. He recoiled after touching me before so he shouldn’t want to now. “No. Seriously, you’re cool.” I began walking back toward the restaurant.

Back toward *my* life.

“I saw the truck. And I know what I saw and what I heard that night. I just don’t know how you walked away.”

I didn't turn around. I tried to focus on the sound of my heart throbbing against my eardrums. The steady thud of his heartbeat intermingled, nauseating me. My hands quivered by my side, but I refused to glance at him again.

"If that would have killed you, Charlotte, I don't know what I would have done. I just don't understand how . . . I'm sorry."

I wanted to tell him that unless he was the hunter or a Greek god, I couldn't die. And I wanted to tell him to worry about himself. I wanted to tell him . . .

The truth is a start.

My throat felt tight, uncomfortable. "Don't be sorry."

"I really do care about what happens to you. It's just—it's my dad."

I squeezed the tarnished metal handle of the door. Why was he trying to explain? Couldn't he just go away and leave it at goodbye? All of his excuses hurt worse than the rejection. I turned to look at him, and I immediately realized it was a mistake. His eyes held the same need I noticed the day he gave me his number. My shoulders trembled, and I prayed he didn't notice before he focused his gaze on the asphalt.

"Coward," I whispered, spinning back toward the door.

Even though I knew he was leaving, the squeal of tires made me jump as I stepped into Romano's.

***

I didn't feel like guiding anyone. In fact, I wanted to make the new soul go away and stop pleading for help. But I had no other choice. The single soul continued to wreak havoc on my frayed mind until I made my way to the beach.

"I don't want to do this," I said as soon as he formed in front of me. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place where I met him. Maybe he was one of the drunken fishermen who frequented work.

He shrugged his broad, liquid shoulders, hung his head, then sheepishly said, "*Thank you, though*."

Ugh. Why did he have to be nice and appreciative? It made me feel like such a jerk for wanting to go home and thinking about making him wait until I was ready to help him. "Yeah, whatever."

I grabbed his hand, leading him unconsciously through the water. The path was so familiar now that I didn't need to pay attention. I hummed and noticed his head moving to the rhythm of the tune. If my mood weren't so sour, I would have giggled at the sight of his liquid body vibrating to my voice.

"*I know you*," the man said at last.

"Do you?" Surprised, I turned to him, shifting my head just a bit when a school of fish wiggled between our faces.

"*I rescued you a few weeks ago*."

Now I knew why he looked so familiar. He was the guy who found me by The Lighthouse. I winced. “Sorry. How did you die?”

“*Heart attack on a rescue attempt*.”

“That sucks.” *Smart answer, Char.* Because any other form of death would have been okay.

He nodded. I tried to think of something else to say to him—something nice or sympathetic—but I only saw bright blue eyes and a cocky smile in my mind. The soul I was guiding just revealed how he died and all I could focus on was Golden Boy.

Total bullshit.

“*So I guess this is it*,” the rescue worker said. When I nodded, he sighed. “*Thanks Charlotte*.”

“No problem.” I waved him off half-heartedly. *Why can’t I stop thinking about that creep? What the hell is wrong with me?* Wyatt and I weren’t even an official couple, but I was acting emo, as if the world was about to end because he couldn’t see me anymore. Sophie was right. I never behaved this way over a boy.

A thunderous, gurgling noise broke my depressing thoughts.

Instead of staring down at the usual glowing pastel, I faced a vortex of muted gray and ebony. It spun like a twister, dragging fish and seaweed into its depths. My hand clutched my heart when the soul of a woman clawed to the top only to be sucked down again. Screams of agony and sobs poured from the cyclone. I felt the agony radiating from the pitch-black depths.

This was the resting place for the bad souls. The souls only Lorelei guided.

I had screwed up.

Big time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lorelei was missing.

She was supposed to have dinner with Cam and me on Sunday night, but she never showed. I knew he worried, but he kept a straight face. On Monday evening when he went to her cottage and discovered her car there, he was sure someone—like her imaginary devil-worshipping parents—kidnapped her. I was worried about her, too, but I knew that if she were hurt, I would know because of our connection. When I told him Lorelei could take care of herself, he hissed, "She's what? 120 pounds? She can barely carry that stupid bag around."

I convinced him to go to the graveyard to take his mind off Lorelei. We took flowers to Brian and Mom's graves, and for the first time in a while, Cam showed emotions other than euphoria. He asked for time alone at our mom's headstone, and I sat beneath a pine tree across the street, pretending to be interested in a pamphlet I found in my bag. This was the first time since Mom's death he visited her, and I was happy. Lorelei, despite her weird disappearance, was good for him.

He took me for ice cream after we left the graveyard and didn't seem the least bit phased when I asked for water. Cam's mind was on Lorelei and mine pinged between Golden Boy and the rescue worker I led to the wrong spot. He wasn't supposed to be trapped with a bunch of bad souls. And after witnessing the sinister whirlpool and listening to the horrible sounds drifting from its depths, I knew Mom didn't belong there either. Evil Francesca and her indecisiveness.

On Tuesday morning, Lorelei was still MIA. Since my screw up, no new souls called out for me to guide them. My lack of work was a relief. It would have been impossible to guide anyone while I was still reeling over sending an innocent soul to the wrong place. Lorelei never explained what happened to the souls once they were trapped inside of the shadows, but even an idiot could figure out that my screw-up sentenced someone to a harrowing afterlife.

Thinking about the rescue worker's soul and my mom and all the other soul's I would eventually come in contact with sent a wave of dread through me. I never wanted to guide again.

"Why the serious face, Goose?" Matt asked, pulling my thoughts from the ocean and back to cosines.

I jotted my name on the top of my paper and sighed. "What? Can't I look deep in thought?"

"You *are* in a mood today, Goose."

"Char, Matt. My name is Charlotte!" A few people turned to glare at us. Mrs. Dalton pushed her glassed up on her nose, held up the

teacher's edition of the textbook, and mouthed, "Get back to work!" I expected Matt to look embarrassed and angry, but his brown eyes shimmered with laugher.

"Okay, *Char*. Is that better?"

Not really. Under normal circumstances I enjoyed the nickname, but today I was fixated on ways to fix my mistake. Plus, Matt's sardonic smile was so similar to Wyatt's, I wanted to choke. Golden Boy needed to stalk some other girl's head, preferably someone who had more time to drool over him. By now, he was probably with a sweet, preppy Summer Girl that his Daddy approved of.

So why was *I* thinking about him when there were more pressing matters at hand. An innocent person's tortured soul definitely trumped dimples and the perpetual smell of fresh linen.

I jabbed violently at the keys on my calculator. Finally, I said, "Whenever you say it, I think of puke."

Matt waited until Mrs. Dalton left the room for her fifth cup of coffee to tease me. "Which one, Char or Goose?" I glowered at him.

"How's Eva?" Just saying her name irked me.

"On vacation. We're not together anymore, just in case you were wondering."

I wasn't, but I nodded anyway. "So I'm taking it you found out she hacked my Jeep."

"Miss Brewer, can you stop talking for five minutes?"

"No ma'am, I was just asking Matt about the assignment. You see, I'm having trouble figuring out how to properly turn on my calculator."

She frowned. As she digested my comment, her face ignited and turned several shades of pink then vibrant, tomato red. "*I'd* be happy to explain any instructions that aren't clear."

"Oh, I think I have it now." If I were mortal, my mouth would be in serious pain from the wide grin stretched across my face. Matt's shoulders shook. I hoped he wouldn't laugh out loud.

She cleared her throat, and I decided that the noise reminded me of fingernails raking down a chalkboard. "Don't think I'll give you special treatment because of who your mo—just finish the assignment at home and come back when you . . . comprehend the lesson."

My mom and Dalton clashed horns on multiple occasions, so her words bothered me. "Yeah, I will," I said, standing up and slinging my bag over my shoulder. My concentration today was so crappy that I welcomed getting in trouble. Time to myself might help me figure out how to save the soul I messed up on. I slinked down the row, past the stunned faces of my classmates.

I was halfway to my car when I heard Matt's laughter directly behind me.

"You're going to get in trouble, Goose."

I shrugged and unlocked the door to the Jeep. "Dalton has always had a vendetta against me. You know, me being my mom's daughter and all."

"That's not very fair," he said quietly.

"And everyone knows she despised Cam. I mean, he and Brian gave her hell. Remember when they swapped out the sugar on her desk with salt? I was pretty much doomed before she even set eyes on me."

Grinning, Matt stuffed his hands in the pockets of his cargo pants. The Wyatt expression again. Golden Boy was everywhere now "You better go back before *you* get in trouble," I warned.

"Hope she won't call your dad. She does that kind of stuff, from what I hear." His stride was confident as he headed into the building, and he turned in a circle once to wave at me.

I smiled back, trying to force the images of Wyatt from my mind.

Two minutes after I started driving, my chest hurt. The scar over my heart felt numb. It was uncomfortable, but I tried to ignore it. Within a minute, though, my chest was on fire.

The hunter was after Lorelei.

The little hybrid behind me honked several times when I made a U-turn in the middle of the road. Not that I cared.

I had to get to the sea.

***

The intense pain stopped by the time I reached The Lighthouse. Now, my chest tingled, but the new sensation was just as worrisome. I found Lorelei in her cottage. She invited me in, her voice shaky, and I was stunned by the sight of her slumped over on the couch. Lorelei's platinum hair hung in dull, damp clumps around her face. Her usually glowing skin was a sickly yellow, and deep, purple circled beneath her eyes.

I eased down beside her. "Are you okay?" I asked.

She pulled her knees to her chest and pressed blue-tinged lips together before heaving a tremulous sigh. "I think so."

"Where have you been?"

Pulling the yellow robe she wore tightly around her shoulders, she glowered at me with poisonous green eyes, and her teeth gnashed together. "Fixing your error; I recovered the soul you just casually tossed in the wrong spot."

What the hell? I'd messed up, but I wouldn't say I casually tossed the soul away. "Now wai—"

"It took me three days to convince Hades to give him back. *Three days*." She held up her fingers, wiggling them to prove her point.

What was I supposed to say? *Um, wow, Lorelei, that really sucks. I hope the god of the underworld wasn't too much of an asshole to deal with.*

I cringed, focused on a fleck of dust on her usually immaculate coffee table, and lamely said, “I’m sorry, Lori. Really, I am. I know I messed up with that man’s soul. Hell, I’ve been torn about it ever since it happened. Thank you for making things right.”

My apology seemed to brighten her mood. She even granted me a tiny smile. I turned my back to her and sat down on the edge of the coffee table. She was too weak to admonish me about proper etiquette. I hung my head, ashamed that it was my fault she’d spent so many days away bargaining with Hades.

She cleared her throat, reminding me of Mrs. Dalton, and I turned my attention on her. She pushed aside the fabric of her robe to reveal her chest. The last time she showed me her wound, it was scarlet. Now the area over her heart had the charred look of a third degree burn. “On the way back, I was attacked,” she said.

I touched my own chest. “I felt you.”

She reached trembling hands toward the table. I saw the glass of water she was eyeballing, and I handed it to her. “I imagined you would. He was close.”

I didn’t want to think about how close he had been. The idea of being left alone—stuck like this—with nobody else like me except Francesca sent a chill through my body. I was almost afraid to ask her how she escaped the hunter. “What happens if he . . .” I couldn’t finish the question because I didn’t want to talk about being captured. Still, if it was the reality of what I was, I might as well ask now.

“We die. But you have to understand, our deaths aren’t like a normal death. There’s no light or dark for us. We simply fade away.”

Was that the reason why she was obsessed with gaining a soul? She did not want to disappear. I didn’t want to fade away either. It made me sick to my stomach remembering how nonchalant I was about being immortal only a couple weeks ago.

“It’s not just that,” she said, sighing. “I want a regular life. I want to be able to taste regular food and feel real pain from a paper cut.”

“I hate it when you guess what I’m thinking.” But I smiled, dropped my tensed shoulders and added, “Besides, paper cuts burn.”

Her laughter was low, hoarse. She held her hand in front of her face and rubbed the tips of her fingers together. “I’d like to find out.”

“What happened to the soul, Lorelei? That man I accidentally—”

“He’s safe now. I took him to the correct spot. But you *must* be careful, Charlotte. Hades was furious. And to be honest, I was very angry too. I’ve been doing this for thousands of years, and I’ve never steered a soul wrong.”

Her calm tone made my mistake sound like a messed-up pizza delivery instead of the big deal I knew it was. After all, I managed to piss off a Greek god. And nearly ruined someone’s afterlife in the

process. I bit my lip.

She touched her chest again and winced aloud. I scooped the empty glass from her fingers. I at least owed it to her to make sure she was comfortable. After I got her another glass of salt water, she asked, "How's Cammy?"

I despised hearing her call him that. "He's . . . good."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"He remembers reality when *you're* not around." I pointed at her, wiggling my finger just as she did when she reiterated the three days she spent with Hades.

She yanked her robe back together. Her lower lip trembled, and if she could manage tears, she would have bawled. I could tell from her expression. For someone so lethal, she was a major wimp. "I'll have to let him know I'm back."

"Where are you going to tell him you've been?"

"I'll think of something."

"Because you're a good liar." It was supposed to be a question, but my words came out like a statement. I already knew the answer. She had to lie because she didn't have any other choice. *I* had to lie, too.

My comment obviously bothered her. She was attracted to Cam because of his genuineness, and knowing her, she felt like a criminal every time she had to twist the truth to hide our secret from him. Her mouth twitched, but she chose not to argue with me. "I'll say I was visiting a college and forgot my cell phone."

"Your car was here the entire time."

"I'll figure it out. You just worry about doing your job right and making sure Wyatt falls for you. And it's probably a good idea to love him back." She winked. Okay, so maybe she couldn't guess everything I was thinking or she'd know Golden Boy was through with me.

And of course, I didn't want him either.

"We're not seeing each other anymore."

"Why?"

Why couldn't she just leave it alone? "Because we're not right for each other," I said. "And we were never actually dating to begin with."

I cut her off before she could answer with a lame, G-rated comment about 'true love's kiss.'

"It's not even a big deal. Look, I better go. I need to go home before my dad starts blowing up my phone. I'm glad you're okay—sorry again for making such a stupid mistake. It won't happen again." I skulked to the door.

But it was a big deal. As I sped toward home, all I could think about was Mom's trapped soul, the way Lorelei's chest looked, and Wyatt.

I was getting really sick of thinking about him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dad and I were on our way to the supermarket when Mrs. Dalton called. Every phrase he repeated made me slink into the seat a little more. “Extreme misbehavior . . . disruptive in class . . . doesn’t keep quiet,” he said, glaring at me. “Yeah, I’ll talk to her about it. Thanks for calling me, Valerie.”

Valerie? Since when did he address the enemy by her first name? He let me have it while we shopped. “I just don’t get you anymore, Char.” He threw two cans of spaghetti and meatballs into our grocery cart. Lectures sucked, but knowing I couldn’t chase it with a Twizzler and a Coke made it ten times worse. I hated being a siren.

“I could say sorry, but we both know that’s a lie.”

He huffed and started to drop an armful of complete boxed dinners on top of the bread. I scooped the loaf up and put it in the front of the buggy. “Cam whines when you flatten the bread.”

“Cam whines about everything,” he growled.

He sped up, and I stared at the writing on the back of his Beverly Hospital shirt. Rolling my eyes, I speed-walked to catch up to him and jabbed his elbow. “You know she hated Mom.”

“Char, don—”

“Well it’s the truth! Ever since Mom questioned her authority over a v-ball player’s detention, Dalton hated her. I bet she was pleased when —”

“Shut up, Charlotte!”

I listened, falling a few steps behind him. When my mother was alive, she joked about how similar my personality was to Dad’s. She was right. Like me, he couldn’t stay angry with someone he really loved, so he cut the silent act in the car. I apologized for what I said because it was crass, and after losing my mom, I didn’t want to alienate him.

***

I squirmed in my seat and crossed my arms over my chest. Cam and Lorelei were back to their lust-stoned routine—all hazy-eyed and gag-worthy giggles. This was the second morning she came over for breakfast. I was glad I didn’t crave normal food because nobody, mortal or immortal, would be able to stomach eating after watching them drool over each other.

Dad was oblivious and squinted at his newspaper, scratching his head. His hair poked out in all directions from sleep. “That’s crazy.”

“What?” Cam and Lorelei asked in unison. They giggled and touched hands. My feelings were so muddled they made my own head spin. I liked having her around for *his* sake, but I didn’t like watching

the PDA. Because, it was just plain gross.

She looked like herself again. Sunny and nauseatingly cheerful dressed in yellow gaucho pants and a tiny tube top. If I wore her heels —platforms that boosted her good five inches off the ground—I'd probably trip and break my neck.

The morning after her attack, she came over, fawning all over Cam. He blushed like a little kid and told her he missed her too. Lorelei's excuse for disappearing was a trip to visit a college in Maine. Cam bought it without asking any questions, but I hated the way her know-it-all green eyes stared me down while she told him.

"Remember that banker who was murdered a few weeks ago?" Dad stuffed a chunk of toast slathered in grape jelly into his mouth.

How could I forget him? He was the dummy with thousands of dollars in a box at the post office. "I think some of the guys at Romano's mentioned him, why?"

"They're thinking the girlfriend might have done it. Looks like she's out on bond."

Danielle. I still remembered her name and the soul pleading for me to tell her about the money. "She didn't do it," I blurted. "I *know* she didn't."

"Evidence, little sister," Cam chimed in. "Besides, how do you know she kill him?"

"Good question," Dad said. Everyone's eyes turned on me. "How do you know she's innocent? Is she one of your friends? You know I don't like you hanging out with older girls."

"She's not my friend, Dad, so stop worrying. And I know she didn't do it because . . . because I just have this feeling. Don't tell me you've never just known something wasn't true, despite what the evidence says." I waited for someone to agree with me, but all three of them stared at me with blank expressions. I dropped my eyes to the placemat. "I *know* there's a way to prove she didn't kill him."

Like the fact that I'd talked to the victim's soul about her.

Lorelei plunked her elbows on the table and demanded my attention. Her lips moved only a fraction, but I could clearly read them. "Don't interfere."

Dad swiped at his mouth with a crumpled paper towel. He took a slurp of coffee and pulled at the neck of his t-shirt when he lowered his mug. "The police will do their job, Char."

"Um, right, because they've never screwed up and blamed an innocent person." It was the first time I made any reference to Mom in front of Lorelei. She knew the whole story but gazed down at her plate of untouched food and unconsciously played with the charm on her necklace. Cam blushed, swallowed hard, and closed his eyes.

Dad flashed me a warning smile. "Okay, Charlotte."

I couldn't believe his nonchalant response. Okay, Charlotte? What the hell was that supposed to mean? He said the same thing to me last year after I listened to an argument between him and Mom. I told him that I knew Kyle was lying.

"She tried to help that loser, not have sex with him," I'd said. Mom was tutoring Kyle to help him pass, and she gave him the F he deserved. That day, dad didn't notice me anxiously tapping my spoon against the plate. Instead, his expression remained blank.

Like a zombie.

He'd rested his forehead in his palm then and shook his head. "Okay, Charlotte. All of this will work out."

It hadn't. And I was positive nothing would be 'okay' this time. I slid from the table and stomped to the living room.

"Where are you going?" Dad shouted as I opened the front door.

"Summer school!"

I slammed the door before he could remind me it was Saturday. Walking would have calmed me, but I drove to the shore at a speed that was sure to blow the motor of my ancient Jeep, not caring whether or not I was pulled over—or if I got in trouble.

The tension seeped from my body when I sank into the ocean. I concentrated on hearing Mom's soul as I let myself be pulled deeper. "Please come. Please?" I darted my eyes in every direction trying to spot her.

When she appeared, she wore a tortured look. She was supposed to be at peace, but her face was the same mask of pain from the weeks before her death. "I'm trying to help you," I said. "But *you* have to help me."

Her liquid head bobbed.

"None of what they said about you—none of that's true, is it?"

She disappeared.

"Come back, please?" My voice was barely a whisper. I touched my heart, counting and waiting for her to return. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . .*

The water particles crawled together, and when she floated in front of me, her hands were clenched. It was eerie watching her eyes close, watching her once dark hair drift around her in a sheer blanket as she struggled to find the words. "*It's a lie.*"

"It won't be much longer," I promised. If I had to go to California and see Francesca in person, I would. Mom's suffering wouldn't stop invading my thoughts until I did.

"Help me."

"I swear," I said. Both our heads twisted at the sound of a heartbeat, the hunter's, pulsating through the current. She cupped her hands over her ears, and for the first time, her lips actually parted. She

screamed—a loud shriek that made me tremble—then faded again.

As I raced to swim to the surface, I saw the top of the hunter's head. He had dark hair that the sea pulled up into short spikes. When I glanced down at the shadow of his face, I realized he didn't wear an oxygen mask.

Demeter had given him the ability to breathe under water.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Home was the last place I wanted to go, so I camped out on The Lighthouse tower, thinking about Mom and willing the hunter to come up for air. He never did. Did he possess any other supernatural underwater abilities that I wasn't aware of? Lorelei simply explained the hunter as being a mortal hired by Demeter, not one who was able to swim without oxygen or withstand pressure that would crush a normal person.

I rejected every call that came from home. My cell phone rang so often, I thought the Beethoven ring tone would burn a hole in my ear. Lorelei knew exactly where I was, and if my family were so concerned about my well-being, she would've just told them, right? Maybe she'd used her sireny sixth sense to determine how angry—no, how *livid*—I was and decided to leave me alone.

Then again, maybe they were all sitting around, talking about how everything would be 'okay' and work itself out.

Rob wasn't pleased when I called in sick. Once he launched into a tirade comparing me to Sophie and Kim, I hung up on him. My boss had some screwed-up vision of the perfect employee—one who never caught the flu or got a migraine. At the beginning of the summer, if he flipped out like that, I would've feared for the future of my job. Now, suddenly, there were bigger things.

"Don't," Wyatt had whispered just after I talked about blaming myself for not doing more for my mom.

This was a problem I could solve, heartbreak *I* could prevent.

There was only one Danielle Chafetz in the Daufuskie Island phone book, and finding her house was simple. She lived in a tiny cottage that wasn't more than a couple of rooms. Her home was so easy to find that I feared for her. The banker's psycho, murderous wife, Cathy, could easily try to hurt her.

Danielle was so petite that it looked like the massive bump under her oversized smock would weigh her down at any moment. Her face was waxy, and her olive green eyes were enlarged and shadowed when she opened the door. She leaned against the doorframe, looking pitiful and tired and irritated.

Before I left, I would warn her not to open the door so fast, even if there *was* a screen between us. "Who are you?" At first, I thought her voice was deep then I realized she was hoarse. Immediately, I felt even worse for her.

"I knew Jameson," I said.

Her lips thinned into a colorless line. She blinked and swiped at her eyes with the back of her hands. "I'm sick of all you reporters. Can't

you just leave me alone?" she demanded, her voice trembling.

"Wait! I'm not here to bash you or ask you questions. I'm here to help."

Maybe it was my expression, or the tone I used that implied that I wasn't lying, but she didn't slam the door on me. She nibbled on her lip as if deep in thought. She seemed reluctant as she unlocked the screen door to let me in.

Her house was warm and smelled like apple pie. The enticing scent drifted from a candle burning on the chipped mantle in her living room. "You can sit down, Miss . . ."

I slid down onto the threadbare couch and locked my fingers together. Her eyes were so big and sad that I was actually at a loss for words. She swayed back and forth in her rocking chair, wringing her hands with an anxious expression on her face, a look that was a mixture of fear and trust.

She reminded me of Sophie.

I managed to smile. "I'm Charlotte Brewer. I want to help you, but you can't tell anyone if I do." I almost laughed to myself because I sounded like a mysterious superhero instead of the girl who'd led her boyfriend's soul to the afterlife.

She shook her head, shaking strands of greasy hair loose from the knot on the top of her head. When she swept them behind her ear, I noticed her fingernails were dirty. Had she *bathed* since she'd been arrested?

"Did the cops take Jameson's stuff?" I asked. No point in making small talk. My neck tingled, and I had a bad feeling about interfering. I wanted to hurry up and tell her what she needed to know so I could just go home.

Danielle buried her face in her slim fingers. Her shoulders shook a few times before she glanced up, forcing a smile, and slowly wagged her head.

Snippets of my conversation with Jameson crept into my mind as I popped my knuckles together. *This isn't as easy as I thought it would be. Why am I here again?* Because here was someone I actually could help before things went too far.

"In his drawer, there's a pair of brown socks. The only pair that color. If you pull them apart, there's a key hidden in one of them."

She rubbed the palm of her hand against her oily cheek and squinted. "I-I don't understand."

I sighed "Just get the damn socks." It wasn't my intention to sound so impatient, but she jumped from her seat, scurrying down the small hallway. I couldn't help but let my eyes follow her, trying to figure out how the cops had assumed she murdered Jameson over his wife.

She returned a moment later and sat on the edge of the rocking

chair. All color faded from her skin when she pulled the tiny silver key from the cotton fabric. Her mouth flapped open and closed. Green eyes darted from the key lying in her palm to me.

"If you take that to the post office, Jameson left you money in safety deposit box number *twenty-seven*—it's a lot. Like, two hundred and fifty thousand." For a brief moment, I wondered if that much money showing up out of thin air would just implicate her even more. I seriously hoped Jameson was smart enough to leave a note or *something* to help his girlfriend.

Her eyes bugged, and she clutched the metal key close to her chest. She rubbed chapped lips with the tips of her fingers before speaking. "What's the catch? You're working with the police, aren't you? Because I swear I didn't do anything."

I'd been in her home for at least fifteen minutes, and she was just *now* starting to think I worked for the police. Sad.

There was a sudden draft through the house. I shivered. Writhing uncomfortably, I waited for her to say thanks or just tell me to leave. "No catch. Hopefully it'll help you out."

She peered down at her lap. Or at least at her misshapen baby bump. There was silence between us. "How do you know all this?"

I hoped she wouldn't ask me if I killed him. That would just suck. "I can't tell you that."

Then she lifted her eyes to my face, and I recoiled and sank deeper into the couch because dark brown eyes replaced wary green ones. Danielle's expression was unsure just a moment ago, but now a mocking grin curled the corners of her lips. Her eyebrows lifted high and she drummed her fingers together.

"Stupid, stupid girl, you're breaking all the rules, aren't you?" She had a musical voice. Something supernatural and weird was going on, I was certain of it. My head told me to run, but I couldn't move or hear the sound of my slow heartbeat.

A god?

Danielle stood and sauntered to where I sat, her stride graceful and confident—nothing like the awkward waddle I observed when she let me in. She squeezed my chin as she leaned over.

"I love when you vapid little things screw up and break the rules. It just means I'm one step closer to destroying you."

This was definitely not Danielle. I tilted my head to one side and squinted. Before saying her name, I took a deep breath. "Demeter?"

"Oh, Aglaope picked a smart one this time."

This time? Hadn't Lorelei said it was impossible for Demeter to kill us? Why was she here? I covered my chest with my hand.

"It won't work around me," she said, pressing her face closer to mine. "But I'm sure you already know that. Did that idiot tell you why

your heart beats as it does? Did she tell you anything about me? Or is she still on that ridiculous quest to find"—her voice took on a whispery pitch similar to Lorelei's as she made a face—"*true love*?"

"No."

She pursed her lips together and drew back. "I had seven children. Your Maker lost my favorite, my seventh child."

"Seven heartbeats," I said. She nodded slowly, and I wanted to tell her *I* wasn't Lorelei—that I had nothing to do with Persephone marrying Hades. I didn't. Obviously, throwing Cam's girlfriend under the bus would do nothing but make Demeter angrier.

Our eyes challenged each other. Finally, I blurted out, "Don't hurt her."

"Aglaope?" she asked. Her wicked smile stretched. It seemed as if it would tear Danielle's pointy face apart.

"No. Danielle."

She stroked my cheek before pinching me hard. It hurt. I shuddered as her nails raked down my jaw line. "Please . . ." Demeter cut my words off, pressing Danielle's finger against my lips. She lifted her other hand to hit me, but her body jolted.

"I can't hurt her."

When she blinked, a shiver ripped through my spine. "You were there in the hospital room? When Kyle's dad spoke to me, his eyes were brown then blue. You were there." The thought of her being so close to Wyatt—having the ability to control him—horrified me.

She straightened, walked to Danielle's chair, and positioned herself on the edge. "Give Aglaope and Thelxiope a message for me, love?"

I swallowed hard but shook my head.

"Tell them that they can hide all they want, but my hunter will find them. And all three of you will die."

Um, great message. People love to be threatened with death.

She lowered her head. The warmth returned to the room, and Danielle looked up. I relaxed when I saw her eyes were green again. "Thank you so much, Charlotte." She smiled down at the key. A few tears fell onto her stomach, but she didn't bother to swipe them away this time. "I hope this will help set things right.

She led me to the door, and I shuddered when she threw her arms around me and pulled me close. I was still numb from meeting Demeter.

I glanced into Danielle's eyes one final time before leaving. They were still green, but for some reason, I had a dull, bitter feeling slink between my chest and stomach—an intuition that assured me I would see the brown eyes again.

I was scared to death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I didn't tell Lorelei about my encounter with Demeter. Maybe I should have because she found out the hard way—Hermes sent her a text message warning from our favorite goddess. Lorelei paced the floor of her cottage, repeatedly reading the text aloud. She twitched, scowled, and spoke in a booming voice. She also had an aggravating way of communicating with her hands. It was like watching a lame music video.

I felt bad that she had to find out about Demeter's weird visit from Hermes, especially since she disliked him so much. As she ranted, sunlight filtered through the windows and illuminated her skin. She looked angelic until another stream of curse words poured from her lips. It sounded awkward and forced coming from Lorelei, and I told myself I was becoming a bad influence on her.

Which kind of made me smile.

"It's not funny, Charlotte. Demeter is dangerous and unbalanced and . . . for the love of Zeus, take that smirk off your face," she hissed.

She was right. The situation wasn't amusing at all. Something about seeing a Greek goddess possess the body of a pregnant chick was disturbing. When I said those exact words to her, she threw her hands in the air and huffed.

"She hasn't done that in years. Not since I lived in England during the 1500's. I can't underst—"

"I seriously hate when you drop dates like that." Every time I imagined her partying with the Tudors or drowning her hunter boyfriend in eighteenth century Germany, I felt like she was debasing Cam. Her stories about the past only reminded me that despite the way she looked, she really was an ancient artifact.

Lorelei swiped her glass of water from the table, splashing some on the floor in the process. She glowered at me over the rim. I tapped a staccato beat against my thighs. I knew I messed up again, but I was confused about why she was making such a big deal about the situation. Nobody was hurt.

"Charlotte, she contacted you through a mortal. It's serious business when she does that. And the worst part is, I *warned* you. I specifically remember telling you that interfering in human affairs angers Demeter. " She sounded so much like my mom as she reprimanded me, my breath caught in the back of my throat. After a moment of studying her face, I blinked.

Finally, I said, "But we guide souls because of Hades, right?" Because that's what she led me to believe, but maybe she was holding out about that, too.

"Yes. Still, breaking rules gives her free access to use the mortals around you to give you warnings." She shook her head in disappointment. "Besides interfering is the biggest mistake in soul-guiding."

Maybe she needed to print out a manual—like a *Soul-Guiding for Dummies*—because finding out so many details about my job after a screw-up sucked. I counted to ten then demanded, "What are the rules?"

"Don't ever interfere with the natural order of mortal lives. And you can't touch souls in limbo. Never tell anyone what you are—what our world is—under any circumstances, especially since you managed to rub Hermes the wrong way. Didn't think that was possible with him, to be honest."

It would be nice if I had a firm grasp on my new, mythological world, but I just shook my head. "Did you interfere in England?"

"Yes."

I coughed a few times, trying to imagine Lorelei breaking the rules. It wasn't like her at all. She seemed to follow the straight and narrow siren life. With, of course, the occasional shipwreck caused by her anger.

"But that doesn't make what you did right. That doesn't make it okay."

Ugh, so she was yelling at *me* even though she made the same mistake before. She was definitely starting to sound like a parent instead of my brother's girl, and I didn't like it one bit. "Okay, so what exactly *can't* Demeter do? It would be nice to know just in case she decides to pop in again."

"She can't kill us. And she can't hurt her host. If you—"

"So why is there even a hunter if she can't off us?"

She frowned and tossed her hair over one shoulder. "It's like you don't pay attention. I've told you this before." She never mentioned Demeter's abilities, but I didn't comment on it. "She can't directly kill us because the other gods, her brothers and sisters, ruled against it. It's the same with mortals. The hunter was her way of bending the rules."

I crinkled my nose, leaning my head to the side. "So Hades is really her brother?" As she nodded, I feigned vomiting. She glared at me. "You do realize that his hooking up with Persephone is illegal in every state, right?" My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I dug it out, but when I saw it was Andy, I considered ignoring it.

"Don't shut your friends out, Charlotte," she said. "You'll be lonely if you do. Trust me."

I wanted her to stop guessing my thoughts. That routine was starting to get creepy. I shoved the phone to my ear. "Hey!" My

attempt at sounding cheerful sucked.

"So you're not dead! You've been hiding, Char."

Rolling my eyes, I tucked the phone between my shoulder and ear and paced to the window. Lorelei's nosiness didn't seem so bad when I couldn't see her happy-go-lucky face. "Haven't been hiding. I've been working."

"That's not what Sophie said."

I groaned. Why couldn't Sophie keep her mouth shut? "Okay, what is it?"

"You're coming out tomorrow night."

"I'm grounded." And this time, I really was. Dad sentenced me to another week after I returned home Saturday night.

"Your dad loves me, we'll say you're here," Lorelei trilled from behind me.

She was trying to pay me back for breaking the rules and evoking the anger of Demeter. I shouldn't have considered going out with my friends as a punishment, but I just wanted to be alone tonight.

How antisocial was that?

"Is that Cameron's new girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"I saw her driving a few days ago. She's hot." I heard the repetitive honk of someone's horn, and I knew he was speeding through town, ignoring other drivers and pedestrians. Andy was a horrible driver. "You sure she's cool with it?"

"She's a Barbie-Care Bear hybrid. She'll cover," I sighed. There was no way of escaping whatever his plans were because Lorelei had opened her big, perky mouth. "What's going on?"

"Bowling with me and Sophie. Bring a date, though."

Okay, *this* was a new development. Was I so consumed with my new aquatic life that I missed my best friends were dating? I refused to question him about it in front of Lorelei, because there was a good chance she would sigh and swoon. And I didn't want to hear her gush about love tonight.

Then again, maybe it would be in my best interest so I could take her mind off *my* mistakes for a few minutes.

I lowered my voice and pressed my mouth close to the receiver. "You do realize that I have nobody I can ask." Why was it so embarrassing to admit that?

"Sophie said you'd say that. Ask Matt."

Ugh. Sophie and Lorelei would be my dating downfall.

Lorelei seemed happy to see me go after I changed back into my jeans and tank top. She said she needed to make a few calls. I hoped she was planning to call Francesca. Maybe Demeter's warning and Zeus's obvious disdain would frighten Maninizer into doing her job to

keep Hades happy.

I called Matt on the way home. At first, he teased me. “Isn’t it passed your bed time, Goose?”

“Something like that,” I said, wanting to change the subject as quick as possible. “Aren’t you supposed to have your nose buried in a book?”

“No homework, but you’d know that if you weren’t a trouble maker.” I heard the blare of his television in the background. He must have been watching a comedy because he laughed. I wanted to make sure he found the movie comical and not me, though.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?”

He took a gulp of his drink, and I vividly pictured him smiling as he spoke. “Nothing, why?”

“Going bowling with Sophie and Andrew Manning. Wanted to know if you felt like going, too.”

I expected him to pick with me some more and inform me he didn’t go out with liquor lightweights, but he simply said, “Yeah.”

We made plans to meet up at The Lighthouse at six and take his car to the bowling alley. By the time our phone conversation ended, I was pulling into our driveway. Dad was in the carport, working on Cam’s old Civic.

“Glad you’re home. Hope you don’t mind I called Lorelei to make sure you were there,” he said, his eyes following me as I opened the front door.

I turned and shrugged. “We had fun.”

“She’s a great influence on you, kid. Such a smart, driven girl.”

“Can you ever say anything good about me, Dad?”

He pressed the door together and motioned at the porch swing. “Sit down, kiddo.” I almost groaned aloud. I really needed to learn how to shut my mouth. Fists clenched, I slammed down on the wooden seat, and his eyes bugged.

“Didn’t that hurt?”

“No.”

He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “You’re a wonderful kid. In fact, I couldn’t ask for a better child.”

I was not in the mood for a heart to heart with my dad, so I played with the chain of the swing.

“I know I don’t always say it, and I’m sorry about that. I have to admit, though, you have scared the hell out of me this summer. The thought of losing you or Cam makes my chest burn.” He stopped to take a breath.

“You won’t Dad,” I mumbled.

He sighed. “And your eating habits are scaring me. Nowadays, I only see you toting around a bottle of water.” Where was Lorelei

when I needed her? I didn't need him freaking out on me—not after listening to her rant just a couple hours before. I wished she'd show up and lull him into a daze.

"I just ate at Lorelei's," I said. "Grilled tofu salads. And you're right, she is an incredible person. I'm happy for Cam." Now it was my turn to tilt my head to the side as his pinched expression smoothed.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my hair. "Why didn't you tell me that? Here I am worried, thinking you're starving yourself. Hell, I'm just glad Lorelei is helping you and Cam." For a second, I thought he was going to say something else, but he just smiled. It was bittersweet.

I headed for the door, but he stopped me with one last remark. "Sorry about not trusting you about the girl in the paper. Looks like the cops arrested the guy's wife. His girlfriend found evidence in a safe, of all places." He scratched his forehead. "Not sure why I didn't think of the wife."

Smiling, I strode into the house, feeling oddly at peace with what I did. Even if I had irritated a few immortals.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Sophie bounced over and hugged me as soon as she spotted Matt and I walking toward them. “Thanks for talking sense into me,” she whispered. She pulled back and smiled brightly at me. Her smile reminded me of the old Sophie. The person in front of me *was* the old Sophie.

I probably had the same goofy expression Lorelei wore when she talked about dating as I sank down across the table from them. They shared an order of nachos like always, but they giggled when their fingers touched. It was kind of cute, and honestly, I was proud that they were together because of my confrontation with Sophie.

“You’re such a pig, Andy,” I said, watching him stuff his face.

His shoulders sagged in relief. Maybe he was afraid that their new relationship status would create an awkward environment. I wanted them together more than anyone did, and I returned his grin. He turned to Matt and shrugged. “Does she talk like this to you?”

Matt appeared to mull over my friend’s question as he rubbed his chin. “Yeah, but she’s usually cheating off my trig notes when she does.”

Andy and Sophie laughed. I pretended not to be paying attention when their fingers interlocked, but part of me itched to say how utterly sweet it was.

Yes, Lorelei’s romanticism was definitely wearing off on me.

Matt didn’t reach for my hand—not that I expected him to. *Wyatt would.* I frowned, and tried to listen in on Matt and Andy's conversation about cars. Sophie pushed their basket of nachos toward me and glared inquisitively when I shook my head to decline.

“We stopped for burgers before we came here.” Matt’s lie sounded so natural, it was difficult not to gape. He bent his head down, brushing his lips against my ear. I could smell peppermint and cologne —the soft, woodsy kind. “She worries about you. I’m sure you ate at home.”

I wanted to ask him why he responded to Sophie’s curiosity, but she interrupted me by teasing him about bowling and he pulled away. I was glad she hadn’t pointed out the obvious about his lie: I wasn’t a meat eater.

“Ten bucks says I win,” he said, grinning.

Sophie cocked one of her eyebrows. Her bottom lip quivered until she gave in and laughed. She stuffed her hand into the pocket of her shorts, pulled out a neatly folded twenty dollar bill, and slapped it in front of him. “Char, inform your *friend* that I raise him another ten.”

I shot a quick, dark glare at her over the way she said friend, then

turned to Matt, smiling. “I think she’s going to beat the hell out of you.”

He winked. “I’m a bowling connoisseur.”

I couldn’t resist watching him as he bowled his first turn. And unfortunately, I couldn’t help but continue comparing him to Wyatt. He wasn’t as serious. After he knocked over seven pins with the first ball, then two more, he danced. Of course, I had no idea that Matt’s moves were actually a sequence from a movie about bowling until Sophie pointed it out.

She rolled a strike, and he sulked as she bragged about it. The corners of his lips twitched until he smiled. “Next time, Chase,” he warned.

Matt was nice to Sophie; something that Golden Boy failed to do the one time he was around my friends. I blinked and saw Wyatt’s blue eyes in my mind. Great. Why was I torturing myself by thinking about him?

“Stay out of my head,” I murmured.

He didn’t. Not even after I silently told myself how awesome Matt was in comparison. When a few of his friends came by our lane to talk to us—friends who knew all about what Kyle accused Mom of—Matt didn’t treat me like a social disaster. He didn’t say he couldn’t see me again.

Wyatt disappeared from my thoughts after one of Matt’s friends mentioned poker. Based on the way the guy waggled his eyebrows and stared cautiously at me, I knew money was involved. As Matt told him he was in, I bit my lip, remembering the fear in his eyes the day he mentioned debt. Was he in trouble over a card game? He was so willing to bet on winning the bowling game that I wondered if he was a compulsive gambler.

Every horrible scenario played in my head as I sat there. I tried to convince myself that I watched far too many mob and gambling movies with Dad and Cam. Soul-guiding was slowly making me schizophrenic.

“What are you thinking about?” Andy asked, sliding onto a stool beside me and waving his hand in front of my face. He and I stopped playing a half an hour before because Sophie and Matt were having a bowl-off. She was winning, and we had to put up with her ridiculous dance after every strike. Tonight it was some ode to disco music.

“School,” I lied. “You and Sophie, huh?”

He laughed uneasily and stretched his arms out in front of his chest. “I’m surprised myself.”

I smiled and lay my head on his shoulder. “I’m not. I think I like this development. But if you two break-up, I don’t want to hear you bitch.”

Tea spurted out of his nose. “Now you’re acting like yourself again.

For a minute there, I was nervous about you."

Isn't everyone?

By the time we left the bowling alley, right after it closed, Sophie beat Matt several times. She danced and teased and finally, she performed an off-key rendition of "We Are the Champions."

Matt shrugged it off, snickering as he drove. "She is pretty good," he admitted.

I arched my back and rested my hands on the dashboard. His shoulders shook even harder at the face I made. "Don't ever tell her that. She likes to brag."

"I had fun tonight. Seriously, Thanks for inviting me." An odd look flitted through his brown eyes, and I found myself curious about how he kissed, and whether or not he'd touch my neck and my hair like Wyatt always did? Most importantly, if Matt kissed me, would sparkling blue eyes haunt me instead of brown ones?

Golden Boy shouldn't have the ability to influence me when it came to other guys, but he did. I wouldn't kiss Matt. The thought alone felt wrong, especially with Wyatt flitting around in my mind like a gnat that wouldn't go away.

Matt didn't drive me back to Lorelei's cottage immediately. Instead, he sped past The Lighthouse gate, steering the Camaro north until we reached Plum Cove. He parked close to the statue of Neptune. Swinging his door open, he motioned for me to follow him.

Confused, I caught up with him as he strode toward the harbor. Our feet made identical noises on the wooden dock as we walked to the edge. I didn't like the silence. Or the way he stared at me. Every few seconds, he lowered his eyes and cast an unreadable look.

A strange yet familiar impression made the flesh on my arms prickle. I rubbed my wrists, glancing at a lone boat waiting in the water. The mask on his face broke and he laughed. "What's so funny?" I asked, refusing to relax my shoulders.

He furrowed his brow. "You look serious."

"I don't like to be stared at. Especially like *that*," I hissed. Still, my discomfort wasn't enough to make me bolt, and I took off my shoes and sat beside him, my hand shaky as I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. "Why are we here?" My tone sounded harsh, but he grinned.

"I hoped we'd catch the sunset." He leaned back on his elbows and tilted his face up. Shrugging, he added, "The stars are just as nice."

I mimicked his actions. My eyes darted between his face and the night sky. "Pretty."

Matt shifted. I pretended not to notice that his movements brought him so close that our legs brushed. "I come out here to think." No more words followed. Was he thinking now? Better question: were his thoughts on me or any trouble he might be in?

"Are you in debt?"

His head whipped around. "Huh?"

"Your friend Josh mentioned poker. And I guess you can say I'm worried."

He could have called me an idiot. Or gotten up and left me sitting on the dock. But the blank look returned to his face. "Money is the last thing on my mind. Besides, I'm lucky. Makes me good at gambling."

"What's the first thing on your mind?" I blurted.

He stretched his face back toward the sky, but I was positive he smiled. Lifting an arm, he pointed to a section of stars. "Ursa Major."

He was thinking about stars? "That's nice," I said.

"You know why it looks like a bear, right?" When I didn't answer, he continued, "One of the Greek gods, Zeus, hooked up with a nymph. His wife found out and turned her into a bear. Zeus eventually sent the nymph into the sky, as a constellation." He nodded to the brightest stars. "That's the big dipper. Seven of them: Alpha, Beta . . ." Grinning, he shrugged. "Sorry. Boring, huh?"

No. It was eerie. "So you're into mythology?" My mind raced. He stood, dusting sand from his jeans, and I struggled to my feet and looked him directly in the eye.

"Yeah, I like it. All the players had so many layers. You have the gods who manipulated everyone around them and the pawns, like the nymph. They were stuck between the gods and the humans. And then there were mortals." Winking, he shrugged. "Lucky it's all just fantasy or we'd be screwed."

He slid by me and shoved his hands in his pockets. I stared after him for a long time with my mouth hanging open, conflicted over whether I should be creeped out or impressed with his knowledge. My heart pounded in my ears and my throat tightened. I walked a few paces behind him, my eyes closed as I listened to the sound of his heart. When I climbed into his car, I sighed in relief and admonished myself for even assuming he could be the hunter.

"You're right," I said. "It would suck if it were real."

On the drive to Lorelei's place, I listened as he sang old rock songs. It was impossible not to smile, especially at his awful attempt to hit high notes. He swerved his Camaro next to Lorelei's Shelby, staring at it longingly just as he'd done when he picked me up.

My own stare was fixated on Hermes's BMW parked beside my Jeep. He was becoming a nuisance and I knew Lorelei agreed. I slipped into the cottage. They were sitting on the couch, in deep conversation, so I trudged to the kitchen to get water. I was in the middle of sending Sophie a text message when I heard a third voice in the house, one that was too recognizable to ignore.

Nervously, I peeked around the corner to see Cam standing at the

door, red-faced and Hermes lounged on the couch looking like the cat that ate the canary. I already knew how the conclusion of my great night would play out.

***

Hermes left shortly thereafter because Lorelei kicked him out, and Cam ordered me to go home while he talked to her. Like a total tool, I bobbed my head. She glanced at me before closing the door. I couldn't look her in the eye. I refused to.

Instead of completely honoring his request, I skulked to the rocks. I was a good distance from the cottage, but their conversation was so loud, everything they said was clear. Cam called her a liar, and then asked her if she was ever interested in him. I couldn't hear her response. She must have said *something* because he started arguing again after several seconds.

I wished he would shut up. My hands groped the stone beneath me, and I struggled to tune out the one-sided argument. I wanted to hear a soul—anything, really—to take my mind off the yelling that reminded me so much of the last weeks between my parents. They spent those last days confused and scared, alternating between dazed to screaming at each other.

I hummed until a feeling of security swept over me and forced my body to stop shaking. When I added lyrics, the music took away the noise of the argument. My song stopped the battle that raged inside of my head—took away thoughts of Golden Boy and the crazy fertility goddess.

Cam's voice, yelling for me to go home before he called Dad, pulled me from my trance. My eyes fluttered open. Instead of the eternal sea that was in front of me when I sat down, I faced a fishing boat. The sea quaked and rumbled, swaying the boat closer to the rocks, and four men poked their heads out. Their faces were calm as they tried to find out where the music was coming from. They didn't panic. Didn't scream. They were so dazed by the song, by what I was, that they didn't seem to care about death.

Just the Lure.

I fought to control the music rippling through me. *I'm not a monster. This isn't me.* "Stop," I cried before clamping my shaky fingers over my mouth.

Despite the crashing waves, the boat stilled.

My anger—my voice—almost caused destruction.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Cam was heart-broken, though I thought it was his own fault. He never gave Lorelei a chance to explain why Hermes was kissing her when he showed up at her cottage unannounced. After talking to him, I discovered that he never knocked, just barged in on her. I wish he knew Hermes like I did. Then he'd realize that it was all a misunderstanding.

Before, Lorelei used her abilities on him, but this time she refused, swearing that it was just too shady, even for a siren.

He claimed that because she deceived him, he didn't have a reason to see her.

When I was in middle school, Sophie and I swiped her mom's fashion magazines and read them in study hall. Not only did the pages ooze celebrity gossip, birth control ads, and sex tips, they also taught an important lesson: Guys would blow any situation out of proportion to ruin a 'good thing.'

Cam said I was too young to understand, and I had to remind him that I was seventeen, not seven. That I wasn't just some idiot with no clue on how relationships—good and bad—functioned. Besides, he was only a year and a half older than I was.

He threw himself into his new job at a bike rental shop, but when he was at home, he moped. 'Depressed Cam' made every other person who annoyed me, including Rob and Mrs. Dalton, seem saintly.

I had to admit I was only semi-happy to be finished with summer school. Escaping Dalton's funky glare would be awesome, but I would miss my conversations with Matt.

"One step closer to being fit for good society, huh?" Matt asked as we walked out to the school parking lot. I bounced on the balls of my feet in front of him and poked my tongue out.

"Whatever, I've always been fit for society."

He cupped his hand over his dark eyes, creating a visor from the sun. A stormy haze had drifted over Gloucester since Wednesday morning, and I welcomed the light. Bad weather made the sea a vicious bitch and soul-guiding was a pain in the butt when the water churned. The good souls hid and the ones in limbo always made an appearance whenever the ocean was angry.

Great. Now I'm personifying water. This job is messing with my head.

"So now that you're finished studying trigonometry, what are you going to do?" He sounded like a sports announcer. I placed my hands on my hips, trying to decide whether or not I should laugh.

"Dude, you're so corny." But I sighed, rolled my eyes dramatically, and said, "I'm going to Disneyland."

I wondered if he would miss making fun of me or if he'd swiftly replace me with a college girl in the fall.

"So you'll keep in touch, right?" he asked.

"Hmm, I don't know," I teased, slipping into my Jeep. I drummed my fingers on the frayed leather of the steering wheel and sighed. "That depends on whether or not you can beat Sophie at bowling. You kind of suck compared to her."

"So says the girl who can only knock over three pins."

I clutched my heart—a prickle dashed across my chest—and pretended to be wounded. "That hurts, Robbins. Unfortunately, it doesn't help your game."

His lips twisted into a wide smile as I shut the door. I lowered my window and leaned against the door, facing him. When wind swept through the car and ruffled my hair, he captured a strand with the tips of his fingers. He stared down at it, rubbing his thumbs over the dark lock.

Matt lifted his eyes to my face and immediately let my hair go after he saw my expression. I hoped I didn't look *too* weirded out. His reaction was just so similar to what Golden Boy would have done.

"Any plans on Friday night?" he asked.

I cleared my throat then flicked my tongue over dry lips. "I'm probably working. For some reason, Rob won't fire me."

"If you can take off, want to go to that music festival? My friends band is performing, remember?"

I pretended not to notice that his voice shook a little. My head felt fuzzy, and I could clearly hear *Wyatt's* voice nudging through my thoughts to ask if I wanted to go to his family's barbecue. I pictured his face, hovering close to mine, under the muted front porch light.

Shoving my fingers under my legs, I forced my brain to enter reality —begged it to just forget about Golden Boy—and I managed a smile. "That would be awesome."

***

I didn't go to the sea to clear my head. Instead, I called Sophie. I wasn't surprised when she informed me that she was at Andy's house. He must have driven her over because her car wasn't parked in his driveway as I pulled in.

They sat on the asphalt in front of Andy's SUV playing cards. Sophie grinned as soon as she saw me. "Thought you were grounded," she said, popping a piece of gum. She shifted, flipping a few of her cards over, then scowled and pushed them back toward Andy so he could deal again.

"For such a good bowler, your luck reeks." I leaned back against his car and tapped my foot against the hard ground anxiously.

Andy stopped mid-shuffle and cast me a sympathetic look. Seeing

the same pitying expression on everyone's face made me want to scream. Or rip my hair out. Maybe they all just thought I was a charity case or pathetic. "Sad summer school is over?"

I shook my head and slouched. "No, why would I be? I just don't want to go home."

Sophie wiggled her eyebrows. "Barbie and Cam?"

Once I glared at her, her expression turned serious. "Nasty. Besides, it's not what you're thinking. He broke up with her."

For a moment, both of my friends seemed interested by my news, and Andy even scratched his head, opening his mouth to say something that was probably perverse and smart-assed. "Why?"

"He thinks she cheated on him."

They mouthed silent "Os" then he shrugged and started to distribute the cards between them. "I thought you hated her."

"I don't *hate* her." My teeth clenched, and I picked with the waistband of my jeans.

Sophie pursed her lips together and twirled a curl around her finger. She twisted her head to one side, resembling a confused poodle. "So you like her then?"

Did I say that?

"It's complicated."

And it was. Because as my friends probed me about the fall-out between Cam and Lorelei, I realized I genuinely liked being around her. Sure, she smiled a lot and constantly talked about love, but it was nice knowing someone besides my best friends and immediate family gave a shit about me.

And it was nice to be able to tell the truth to at least one person.

I wasn't too sure if I was prepared to let Cam just throw that away.

"You're zoning out." Sophie's widened her eyes. She hummed the theme from *Twilight Zone* but stopped after I groaned. "I just asked if you could give me a ride to work."

Romano's was definitely out of my way, but Sophie's stare burned a hole in my cotton tank top, and I realized she had something to tell me. For the first half of the drive, she sang and stared out the window. Finally—after I cleared my throat several times—she turned toward me, took a deep breath, and leaned against the center console.

The sheepish expression on her face never meant good news. "What did you do?" I demanded.

"Do you think Andy is too good for me?"

I burst out laughing so hard, so ridiculously loud, that I almost swerved off the road. She didn't like my reaction because she crossed her arms over her chest and poked her bottom lip out. I wanted to thank her for making me laugh, but I focused on not wrecking the Jeep. I didn't want another fiery crash to make people talk.

"Why would you think that?"

"He's practically a virgin."

This time, the Jeep veered off the pavement because I was disgusted. With the collection of balled-up phone numbers Andy had, her comment astonished me. "I did *not* need to know that."

She fiddled with the buttons on my prehistoric cassette player. "He's really worried that I'll start back up with the pills, you know?" At least she changed the subject to one that I could attempt to talk about.

"Are you?" My tone was so accusing, even I cringed.

Her hair swung as she shook her head fast. "No. At least, I don't think so."

Sophie's response was so honest, I couldn't argue with her. And if her habit started again, I would call her out. If there was a next time, I would do the right thing by her. I would interfere like I should have done when Mom's depression began.

I faced her after I pulled into the parking lot of Romano's. "Andy is not better than you. He really cares about you, and I'm stoked to see you two together."

I stiffened when she leaned over and brushed her lips across my cheek. "You're such an awesome matchmaker, Char."

Great.

Lorelei had officially corrupted me.

***

I stood over Cam's slumped form, contemplating whether I should just leave him alone and let him sleep off the alcohol. He looked peaceful in his inebriated slumber, and my inner-voice warned me not to bother him until he was alert and sober.

Unfortunately for him, my conscience didn't win the argument.

I took pleasure in dumping the almost full bottle of scotch in the kitchen sink. And I was even more satisfied with myself when I filled the empty glass container with cold water. My biggest triumph of the day wasn't completing summer school or playing Cupid for my friends. It was the look on Cam's face when he shot straight up off the couch once I poured the water on him.

He turned scarlet, sputtering incoherently, and his eyes were wild as he tried to grasp where he was. Once he realized he was still in the garage, he glared at me through a bloodshot haze and dragged shaky hands through tousled hair.

"What are you doing?" His voice wasn't angry, like I expected. He just sounded *defeated*.

And *sad*.

I slid the bottle on the side table and stared down at him as he rested his elbows on his knees and cupped his face with both hands. I hadn't really thought of what my explanation would be. All I knew

was I refused to see him drown his unhappiness.

The era of ‘Drunk Cam’ was over.

I sank down beside him. My hand crept to his back, but I wasn’t offended when he pushed me away. I stared at my knuckles and listened to his heavy breathing.

A few minutes passed before I spoke to him. My voice was calm, unlike the violent storm raging inside of me. I didn’t want to be angry with him, but he was being an asshole, and no, there wasn’t a nice way to describe his behavior. “If this is over Lorelei, you realize that you wasted time and booze, right? Because she didn’t do anything wrong.”

His voice muffled, and the only word I identified was ‘liar’.

“I’m not a liar and neither is she.” *At least not about this.* “I’m not covering for you anymore *or* making excuses.”

“God, you sound like Mom,” he snapped, looking past me at the television screen. I stomped across the room and yanked the cord out of the wall. Take that extreme motocross racing.

“If that’s the case, here’s a message for you: I realize you didn’t get to go to college last year because of Mom, and that you have a trust complex now, but this”—I held up the empty glass bottle—“won’t help your problems. Dad’s been through enough.” His face was pinched now, and since I would yell if I said anything else, I cut my tirade short.

I left the room, sulking over my inability to follow my own advice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I had to work Saturday afternoon but felt the intense urge to see Lorelei first. The miserable expression that took over her face the night Cam freaked out haunted me almost as much as Mom's translucent despair.

Lorelei shouldn't have to hurt because of my brother. It was almost ironic since I feared for his safety after I found out what she was. She wouldn't harm him. At least not physically.

She didn't answer after I knocked several times, so I let myself into the cottage, and immediately, two disturbing sights pinged me in the chest. Lorelei's usually pristine living room was cluttered with designer suitcases.

She's leaving.

I didn't obsess over the luggage for too long, because the second *thing*—Francesca—stood over one of the open bags. She didn't glance up at me as I gaped at her. She just continued to sift through lacy bras and underwear. When she finally acknowledged my presence, a good two minutes after I stepped into the house, she held a scrap of underwire, pastel sheer in each hand. "What do you think, Scarlett?"

Not only was I damn sure she remembered my actual name, but I also bet 10 bucks she was fully aware of how much I hated her. Why would she ask me about her underwear? Why would she assume I even cared?

"Where's Lorelei?" I asked.

She huffed and tossed both bras back into the bag. Planting manicured hands on her bony hips, she shook her head until her hair swung all around her. The clucking noise she made with her tongue was more annoying than the fake laughter of Summer Kids. "I loathe the name *Lorelei.* She's Aglaope, got it?"

She prepared to continue her rant, but I chose not to give her the opportunity. The rage building inside of me took over, and before I realized what I was doing, I was next to her, shoving her down onto the couch. She landed with a thud against one of the suitcases. Her crimson-painted mouth hung open for a few moments. She was deciding what rude remark to make next.

"My sister never told me you were so feisty," she mused. Her eyes remained icy as she forced a smile, and I decided I liked her better when her lips were twisted into the pout that graced the magazine covers.

The bitchy look really did suit Francesca.

I spun around and paced in front of the couch, hating her a little more as her gaze dropped to my dirty sneakers and she scrunched her

face. “I hope you have plans to guide the souls that are waiting for you. Because if you *don’t*, the hunter won’t have to look very hard for you. I'll deliver you to him myself. I have no other reason to want you around,” I said.

I waited for her to yell at me—or lash out since she was more powerful—but she only laughed. Her thin shoulders quaked, and if she could cry, tears of merriment would have trickled down her cheeks.

Lame.

Once she stopped mocking me, her typical taunting, cruel frown replaced the smirk. “You won’t do it.”

“So sure?”

“Of course I am. You’re exactly like Ag.”

“She’s killed before,” I pointed out.

Lorelei cleared her throat. Francesca and I twisted our heads to glance at her. She stood in the doorway, sipping water, but despite her normal bright apparel, her expression was cheerless. Her lips thinned into the tight line that seemed to be the norm whenever Francesca was around.

Maninizer obviously had that negative effect on people—both mortal and immortal.

“I hate that you underestimate others’ emotions, Thel,” Lorelei said. “This isn’t just any soul Charlotte is worried about. It’s her mother. What would you have done if it were ours?”

Francesca lifted her shoulders up to the diamonds glittering in her ears. “But it’s not ours.”

Three months ago—no, three *weeks* ago—I would have gone nuts if I heard that. My lessons in self-control were working because I gave her a nasty look. It only seemed to fuel her spitefulness, as she grinned like a cat.

I jabbed a finger at Francesca and told Lorelei, “Please tell me you hate her as much as I do?” I examined one of the paintings on the wall in an effort to evade both sirens’ stares.

“Not always,” Lorelei whispered.

I brushed my thumb over the canvas in front of me, and for the first time, I realized it was another Lorelei image. It was older than the rest and the sight of her with an almost compassionate looking Francesca and a younger girl with auburn hair amazed me.

“One of your other sisters?”

Lorelei nodded and took another swallow of water. “Peisinoe.”

“She died in Rome nine hundred years ago. Silly thing willingly gave herself up to the hunter. Said she didn’t want to run forever,” Francesca added. Lorelei gasped at her sister’s bluntness. She eyeballed one of the vases sitting on the side table. Even though I knew Francesca was bulletproof, I wanted Lorelei to go trashy talk

show guest on her and slam it against her perfect head.

Hell, I would even offer to help.

I slid down in the armchair across from the skank. She crossed her legs, rubbing the heel of her black platform, and yawned like she was bored. I wanted to tell her to stop being so worthless and go guide Mom's soul. Instead, I averted my gaze back to Lorelei. "Are you leaving?"

"Why do you care?" Francesca asked.

I ignored her and tilted my head at Lorelei. "I really don't want you to leave, and I know Cam will come around." I paid Francesca no mind when she muttered something. Pretending she didn't exist might make her leave.

Lorelei shook her head, a small smile playing on her lips. "I'm glad you want me to stay. That means a lot to me, but I am not moving. This"—she gestured at the luggage scattered around the room—"is all Thel's. She's staying with me for a little while."

Francesca snorted loudly. Lorelei and I glowered at her. "You should just drown him," she hissed.

I growled and dug my fingers into the jacquard fabric of the chair so I wouldn't pounce. "How long she staying here?"

"Until next week."

Wonderful. At least there was one good thing about having to put up with Francesca's maninizing presence for a week. "Make sure she guides my mom," I said to Lorelei. My tone was hateful when I turned to Francesca. "If you don't, I'll find a way to hold your lazy ass underwater so the hunter can kill you. I'm running late for work, so I really hope you get a start on being productive."

Francesca's muddled expression followed me as I skulked from the cottage, but her sister smiled, and I half-expected her to applaud me.

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When I moped through the double doors of Romano's cursing, Rob lifted his eyebrows and temporarily stopped stalking a group of customers. He followed me to the bar. Shoving my bag in its usual spot, I granted him a harsh grunt and decided that if I tried to use actual words, I would go off on a rant. Besides, what was I going to say?

Hey, Rob. So sorry for being completely unreliable again. Had to speak my mind to an immortal witch before coming to work, I'm sure you understand.

But he didn't comment on the fact I was late. Guess he didn't see a point anymore—I was habitually tardy. The only reason he refused to fire me was that paying someone else more money to do my job would blow.

"Everything okay at home?" he asked, picking up a bottle of

cleaner. The toxic mist drifted up in the air when he sprayed it, and a few of the regulars sitting at the bar choked on the fumes. Didn't he know mixing bleach and lemon-scented cleaner was a stupid idea?

"Fan-freaking-tastic."

He nodded, though it was obvious he didn't buy what I said.

In the first hour, I pissed off a group of Summer Girls by botching one of their orders. And when they giggled like bimbos while deciding on dessert, one of them heard my whispered remark about growing brain cells. They left me a nasty, misspelled note scribbled across the bottom of the receipt instead of a tip.

Tonight, it was almost worth offending them.

One of the regulars bumped into me as I refilled his coffee, and the entire pot poured onto my skin and dribbled to the floor. I reassured him repeatedly that I would get my hand checked out. The damage was already done. He noticed that I didn't react right away to the scalding coffee and his eyes remained glued to my skin, waiting for it to turn red or blister. Only moisture formed over my hand, the same from the night my leg was on fire.

He didn't call me out on my story, but I caught him pressing his own hand to the glass pot. He winced then returned to drenching his food in tartar sauce.

My evening had no chance of improving once I saw the last person I expected, or wanted, to see in my section: Golden Boy's Stepford mother. She sat next to a girl who showed off an impressive neck tattoo and array of earrings when she twisted her head to the side. Lip Ring Girl made such a startling contrast to Mrs. Golden that I couldn't help but wonder why they were even together.

I dragged my feet to their table hoping—okay, *praying*—she wouldn't remember me. That Wyatt started bringing some other girl around, that she conveniently forgot I ever came to her home.

But she smiled while I shifted awkwardly in front of them. "Charlotte?" she asked.

I hoped I didn't look constipated as I tried to channel Lorelei's constant optimism. "Hi, Mrs. Anderson! How are you?"

"I'm wonderful!" She gestured to the other girl. "Charlotte, this is Audrey, my daughter."

"The infamous Charlotte," Audrey said. I couldn't stop staring at her bejeweled bottom lip glittering under the fluorescent lights. It wasn't necessarily a *bad* thing that she knew my name, right? After all, I knew who she was and where she spent most of the summer. Still, the girl sitting in front of me with the brilliant red hair and eyebrow stud was so different from the Audrey I imagined, I grinned.

I wondered how Wyatt's image-obsessed Dad reacted to her. "I'm scared to know why I'm infamous," I said. "What can I help y'all with"

Instead of just ordering an expensive mixed drink and letting me get back to my work, Mrs. Golden tapped her fingers together and wrinkled her forehead. “Have you been busy lately? You haven’t come around.”

I blinked.

Did she forget that her kid came to my job claiming he couldn’t see me? That I was a threat to her husband’s political career? That Kyle and his dad completely smeared my family’s name?

“Just finished up summer school,” I blurted.

Audrey’s toothy grin was similar to his. She shook her head like she understood and winked a heavily lined eye. My explanation to Mrs. Anderson completely flew over *her* head because she just kept smiling. “You’ll have to start coming back over. I think Wyatt misses your company.” Audrey shushed her and put an end to my misery by pointing to the menu and asking a question about a vegetarian dish.

I was mechanical as I jotted down their order. Robotic when I hobbled to the kitchen to give the slip of paper to the cook. My trance broke after Rob yelled at me, demanding to know if I was high.

“You look dazed. Do I need to mouth swab your again?”

His mom has no idea about what happened.

“Are you ignoring me?” Rob asked, puffing his chest out.

“Sorry, don’t feel so good tonight.”

He made a face then pointed toward the bathroom. “That makes two of you. Your friend has been in there for the past fifteen minutes.”

I didn’t realize Sophie was working. He started to say something else, but I waved him off, racing to the restroom.

She was alone, hunched over the sink, and strange sounds gurgled in the back of her throat. I fell against the door once it closed behind me. “Dude, are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” she slurred.

She was fucked up at work.

Didn’t she tell me the day before she was done with pills? What happened over the last twenty-four hours that would cause her to regress? I took a step forward, reaching out when her head plopped against the ceramic sink. “Soph?”

She didn’t answer so I inched closer. The draft of cool air that swept through the tiny room assured me I wasn’t speaking to my best friend. My heartbeat stopped, and I stiffened.

“What did you do to her?” I whispered.

Observant brown eyes replaced Sophie’s dark blue ones as she twisted around, a sadistic smile slung across her face. “What have you done to her?” I asked again. Demeter’s laugh paralyzed me, and she examined one of Sophie’s flushed hands.

“You should give up,” she sang. She turned back to the mirror and

fluffed blonde curls, her brown eyes demanding my attention through the glass. I recoiled at the obvious fear in my own reflection. “Did you give my message to your sisters?”

My fists clenched. I just wanted to shake her, but I reminded myself that lunging after her would only hurt my best friend. “They’re not my sisters.”

Her body—Sophie’s body—vibrated with laughter, and we both brushed off Rob’s desperate knocking on the bathroom door. “Char? I everything okay?” he called.

“What did you *do* to her?”

She faced me again, and Sophie’s bag dangled from her wrist. “Oh, relax, love. Just a bit of mortal medicine. If you’re fast enough, she won’t die. Make sure you tell Thelxiope and Aglaope I stopped by.”

I gripped the top of a stall for support. She couldn’t kill Sophie . . . that was against the rules, wasn’t it? “Why don’t you go and see them yourself?”

She stood so close to me now that I saw flecks of yellow in her eyes. “I enjoy contacting them through *you*.” She blew me a kiss then wiggled her fingers. “You have very little time left.”

I knew Sophie was back when the room became muggy. Her eyes were wild, *terrified,* and she clutched her head. Lips quivering, she stretched her arms out, and then she tumbled forward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I convinced Sophie's parents, and even Sophie, that she took a sip from a drugged soda. A few years ago, I watched a *Dateline* special on drink doping with Mom, and as soon as the police questioned me about what happened, I remembered the show. My fabricated story was elaborate and just a bit ridiculous, but there was no way in hell I was letting my friend burn for a situation that was out of her control.

A situation that I caused.

Rob was miffed because my claims suggested one of his customers left the tainted drink sitting around. When he cornered me about it, I told him to suck it up and get over it. At least he wasn't under investigation. And besides, he seemed more concerned about the possibility of losing two employees than the fact Sophie was in the hospital.

He was momentarily appeased when I told him neither of us planned on quitting.

Cam went with me to visit her on Wednesday morning. He shuffled around her room after nodding a terse greeting, jittery and awkward. He refused to look her in the eyes. The situation reminded him of Mom.

He pretended to be interested in the bouquets of wilted flowers and the deflated balloons poking up throughout the room as I sat on the edge of the bed. The distant, almost blank, look on his face made me wonder what he was thinking. Was he asking himself what would have happened if someone helped our mom?

He didn't need to torture himself with unanswerable questions.

Reluctantly, I dragged my gaze away from Cam and fiddled with the corner of the fleece blanket. "Andy come by lately?"

Sighing, Sophie played with the tab of the contraband soda I brought her, and shrugged. "He was here last night." Andy freaked over what happened. Worse than her parents, in fact. He couldn't comprehend how Sophie had no memory of the drink she supposedly picked up. Or coming to work that night.

"I'll talk to him again," I promised. She hugged me, her smile vibrant and alive, and the scent of the generic, sulfur shampoo the hospital doled out drifted up from her hair.

A nurse brought her breakfast. Judging by the way she whined at the sight of runny eggs and undercooked sausage, she was more than ready to go home. I took a swig from my bottle of salty water and decided that even if I were mortal, I preferered it over hospital food. "Can't your dad negotiate a steak for me?" she asked.

"I'm telling you, vegan is the way to go."

She pointed at my water, snorting. “Because *you’re* always eating healthy vegetables, huh?”

Sometimes, I hated how perceptive she was.

Cam was watching basketball on ESPN when Lorelei stopped by. He did not look frustrated as she pranced into the room, just uncertain, as if he needed to figure out whether he overreacted before and what he could say to fix his stupidity. She smiled. He turned scarlet.

And I kind of wanted to puke.

Sophie mumbled something about Lorelei’s shoes—strappy sandals that looked more like bondage than high fashion. Lorelei plunked a sparkly gift bag on Sophie’s lap. “Charlotte mentioned you love bright stuff.”

Personally, I thought the lime green t-shirt was fugly, but Sophie’s elation stopped me from telling her that. She spoke the name of a brand I never heard of and beamed at Lorelei. “This is so awesome!”

God, I think she reads my mind. I never told her anything *about Sophie’s fashion mishaps.*

Lorelei turned to Cam, and her expression was wretched, sappy. “I should probably go. It was good seeing you.” She placed a hand on Sophie’s shoulder and smiled at her. “I’m so glad you’re okay.” Wrinkling my forehead, I watched her walk—slower than usual with her shoulders drooping—from the room.

Cam stared after her with a look that was equally as lame, if that was possible. I sighed. Their relationship was such an enormous paradox, it made my ears buzz. “You should probably go talk to her. Because, you know, stubborn people suck.” His eyes widened, but maybe my words made sense. He practically pounced from the room.

Gag.

“Did you see the way they looked at each other?” Sophie squealed.

“Yeah, I’m still debating if I should puke in the sink or on the floor.”

I tipped across the room, squished my face against the window, and stared out into the field behind the hospital. Another brutal, late summer storm was preparing to shroud the town in darkness, and although I was nowhere near the sea, I heard a soul calling for me.

Sophie cleared her throat. Her eyes were somber when I turned around. “I don’t know what happened to me, Char. One second, I’m writing on my time sheet and the next . . .”

She looked lost. Guilt then anger sneaked through my body because it wasn’t fair. Why did Demeter use her to get back at me? The worst part was I couldn’t tell her the truth. I had to lie to my best friend about why she was in the hospital. Stupid siren rules. “But you’re okay now,” I said. “And sometimes, that’s what matters.”

Running her fingers through her blonde hair, she shook her head. “That’s just it. I’m not okay. That’s never happened to me, and I think

it was something else." She took a deep breath then added, "Like something you're not telling me."

I faked a smile. "I think you're tired."

"You can tell me anything," she lisped. When I didn't answer, her bottom lip quivered. "But I have a feeling this is important. Something that maybe I'm better off not asking."

"Your intuition usually rocks."

She blinked a few times then held Lorelei's gift in front of her face and swooned over it. The shirt was just as hideous as it was a couple minutes before. "I can't wait to go home on Friday."

Sophie was so trusting, so quick to take my word, that she frightened me.

***

Cam wanted me to go home alone.

Lorelei sidled by his side as we walked to the hospital parking lot, chattering about her out-of-town relative. She kept emphasizing that her *relative* was staying at her cottage. I figured they thought I was too stupid to realize she was suggesting they go somewhere else.

Foul.

He tossed me the keys to my Jeep and draped his arm around her bare shoulder. Looking at me sideways, he said, "Lori will bring me home later."

"Whatever, dude. At least I get my car back."

The way their hands touched as she stretched out her palm to give him her keys was vomit-worthy. Today, I was glad I wasn't mortal, just because I didn't want to yack all over the pavement. "See you whenever. Don't forget about your new job," I muttered, sliding into my car. Still, I was ecstatic to see him smiling again.

He tapped on the window, and I rolled it down. "Drive slow, little sister. Dad'll have a heart attack if you have another accident."

On my way to the sea, rain splattered against the cracked windshield, so I listened to Cam's advice and drove five miles under the limit. My life was so chaotic the past few days that I never took the opportunity to think about my brief conversation with Wyatt's mother.

Why didn't she know about my alleged threat to their cookie-cutter family? I wanted to ask him. I wanted to look into his eyes and force him to tell me why he pushed me to the point of letting my guard down, just to disappoint me. But mostly—and I wouldn't admit it to anyone else because it made me a lame wimp—I wanted to see him again. Was it pathetic that I looked forward to going with Matt to the music festival just because I thought it would take my mind off of Golden Boy?

Yes.

Because I spent my entire high school career loathing girls who played that game with boys.

I parked at The Lighthouse, and by the time I reached the shore, the rain pelted my face. Seven souls found me fast once I sank beneath the thrashing waves. One of them huddled away from the rest of the group, and when I tried to talk to him, I realized it was someone I knew.

Donnie Shaw was my eighth grade science lab partner. We always disliked each other, and unfortunately, he was a bigger jerk in liquid soul form.

"*Do I have to do this?*" he whined, wrenching away from my grasp.

My mother was in Purgatory, and I was stuck guiding an ungrateful idiot. "I'd be happy to make you wait until the weekend."

As he shook his see-through head, he scowled. It was the same condescending look he gave me the few times our grade sucked or when I misplaced our classwork.

"*That won't be necessary, Brewer.*" He lifted his head high and paid close attention to the radiant path in front of us. "*I knew there was a reason why you got a C in science*."

Was he joking? My ex lab partner was dead and bringing up my grade in a class we took together over three years ago. Fail. "Besides the fact that I *hate* science," I mumbled.

He grunted but didn't say another word.

"How'd you die?" I asked, attempting to make his last semi-normal moment a pleasant one. In spite of everything, he *was* a good soul even if he lacked social skills and house training.

"*Fishing. What else would it be*?"

I could have told him about the soul whose wife shot him in the stomach or the one who drowned because of a heart attack, but I rolled my eyes. If I were a spiteful siren—like Francesca—I would have *accidentally* led him to the shadowy whirlpool for the naughty souls.

We hovered above the flashing lights. I swept my arm out in front of me. "Welcome to eternity, Donnie. I'm pretty sure your essays on protozoa are now totally worthless." My jab at science must have pissed him off. He didn't even mumble a thanks as the vortex dragged him in.

I swam away, calling out for Mom, but she didn't answer, and I felt like I needed to let her know how close I was to saving her. Maybe she didn't want to see me. She was probably sick of hearing the same promise every time I guided someone else.

My mind was a jumbled mess, making it harder for me to detect if Demeter's pawn lurked nearby. One second I was sure I heard his heartbeat and the next, the ocean was calm and silent. Frantic, I swam

to the surface. I emerged from the sea to find Francesca standing on the beach, soaked from head to toe from the downpour. The tide threatened to touch her feet, and she took a jittery step back.

What is her deal?

Her manicured fingers drummed over her heart. “Doesn’t this scare you?” she asked, swiping her other hand across her slick face. She kept skittish, fearful eyes glued to the Atlantic.

I glanced down at the soggy sand clumping at my feet and exhaled. “Yes.”

She continued to touch her heart, peering out at the miles of crashing waves. “This one is different—I don’t think he has a soul.”

So he *was* underwater with me. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve been listening to souls for longer than I care to remember. He has a heartbeat, and it’s distinct. But he doesn’t have a soul. There’s never been one like that. It makes me wonder what Demeter gave him in return.” She turned to me again, bitter laughter shaking her body like a puppet. “Oh, what a Solstice this will be.”

“What the hell is that?”

“The gods and demigods meet on the Summer and Winter Solstice.” She pursed her lips, as if she expected me to know what she was talking about. I didn’t. I lifted my shoulders, and suddenly, her eyes widened. She shook her head to each side. I couldn’t decide if she looked more amused or shocked. “Ag’s told you about that, *right*?”

What would a gathering among the immortals have to do with me? Other than the impromptu meeting with Zeus, weren’t the gods off limits to us? “No, she hasn’t. What about it?”

She clucked her tongue. “She made you, *she* can tell you. Though, I can’t wait to see her explain this.”

“You’re not making any sen—”

“Ask Aglaope about the Solstice,” she repeated, her voice raising an octave. The ice returned to her glare.

Maniacal Francesca was disturbing, even more than when she was intentionally malicious. Still, I made a mental note to ask Lorelei about the Solstice. I decided not to pressure Francesca on the subject anymore. She looked pissed off, and I was scared that annoying her would cause her to stop telling me about the hunter. “Can’t you kill him? The hunter, I mean. Aren’t you stronger?”

“If I could kill him, I would have. Besides, *she* can always find a new one.” She spun around and stalked in the direction of Lorelei’s cottage. I followed her. “There are so many rules, but she finds ways around them. Like with your friend. And if you break a rule, you’re fucked.”

Lorelei explained Demeter’s ability to weasel around the rules after I asked her about Sophie. Demeter didn’t *physically* hurt her, so it wasn’t a against the epic immortal rule book, just a slap on the wrist.

“Is this the first time Demeter's done this?” I breathed, catching up to Francesca.

She flinched but continued walking. “My last husband poisoned himself seventy years ago. It was my fault because I broke one of the coveted rules—infuriated her. She started taking over people around him. He swore he heard voices. Saw *things*.” We reached the cottage. She turned the front door knob, her hand trembling and back rigid. “I’ll make my decision about your mom before I leave. In the meantime, you should probably talk to Ag about the Solstice.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lorelei talked me into going shopping on Thursday. As freaked out as I was about our senior and junior siren bonding experience, I exploited her love affair with yellow clothing as a chance to grill her about Francesca's husband. Feeling sorry for Maninizer was more messed up than guiding random souls or chugging salt water.

The bubbly sales girl wouldn't go away, so Lorelei's answer was broken and drawn out.

"Well, she's not lying," she said once I started clearing my throat. She gave me one of those don't-get-impatient-with-me looks that reminded me of Mom. I was starting to get used to it, so the expression didn't catch me off guard. "Don't you remember me telling you her life has been difficult?"

Yes. However, I was incensed that day, the same I flipped out over my mom's fate. Maybe if Lorelei mentioned *why* Francesca refused to guide the souls in limbo, I would not have said so many bad things about her.

Only a few because she was still a witch.

"Don't you think it would be, I don't know, *easier* to tell me important stuff before I have to find out on my own?"

A group of Summer Boys sauntered by, gawking at Lorelei, and she granted them a docile nod. I groaned and cast them a rotten glare. Bending over a pair of pricey suede boots, she admonished me for being rude then sang one of her proverbs about life and silver platters.

Too bad her sage advice never applied to being a siren.

"Um, Lorelei, before I forget, what's the Solstice?"

Her head snapped up from the shoe. She squinted at me. "What do you know about that?"

"Not much. Just that the gods meet up. If it's anything like Club Olympian, I bet it sucks."

She edged closer, darting her eyes around as if she was afraid someone might hear. "But who *told* you about it?" I flinched. For once, Lorelei sounded exactly like Francesca.

"Your psycho sister."

Snorting, she shook her head and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "I can't believe her. She is such a piec—"

Fear gnawed at me. "Okay, you're scaring me. What is it?"

"We—we can't talk about it here. Later," she promised.

Later was never good. Her elusiveness only intensified my apprehension. I just knew I would discover more creepy immortal facts once she divulged what was so special about the Solstice. Things always worked that way with Lorelei.

When she dropped me off at home, she dumped the bags of clothes in the empty "Man Room." She seemed pleased with herself when I thanked her, a Cheshire cat grin tugging at the corners of her mouth, but she forgot I existed and turned into a pile of incoherent giggles once Cam made his presence known. He headed out the room and motioned for her to follow.

I cleared my throat loudly. "Hey, I thought we were going to talk about that *party*."

He stopped, glanced over his shoulder, and lifted his eyebrows. "What party?"

"Charlotte's boyfriend," she said, pushing him out the garage. She closed the door behind him and waited until after the sound of footsteps and grumbling became distant to speak. "You have to understand that I didn't want to put so much pressure on you, Char."

I threw myself onto the couch and released a frustrated growl. "Too much pressure to do what? Can you please just tell me what's so important about the Solstice?"

She paced around, refusing to make eye contact with me. Before I was worried, but now, indisputable terror crashed into my chest. It inched past my shoulders and furled around my neck, choking me. I counted my heartbeat while I waited for her to respond. "Your soul is going to be sold," she whispered.

A month ago, I would have choked from laughter. Now I could not. Somehow, it fit my chaotic, scary life. I continued to stare at her blankly.

"The gods have an auction twice a year for all the souls they've collected through various means. Yours will be sold during the Winter Solstice. In December." She stood over me now, her hands shaking. "I'm so sorry, Char. I really thought you'd be mortal quickly, that—"

"But we don't have souls anyway so it shouldn't matter, right?" I asked hoarsely. She opened her mouth to say something then bit her tongue. "*Right*?"

"It *does* matter. When we lose our souls . . . Hermes keeps it until the auction. The god who wins it has control over you. Of course you can't be killed, but you are like a puppet. It's terrifying."

If it was so terrifying, why was I just now finding out about the Solstice? She'd warned me, though, in her own, vague way. "But you and Francesca aren't being controlled. You're never forced to do anything against your will."

She smoothed my hair down and grimaced. I already knew that our situations were utterly different, even before she spoke. "Hades bought our souls long ago. He won't use it for bad. It's yours I worry about. Demeter is angry with me, with Thel. That makes you a target. Who knows what her plans are."

The thought of Demeter bidding on my soul and becoming my very own immortal puppet master made me numb. I knew the terror and anxiousness would return soon, but at that moment, I felt nothing. Standing, I shook my head slowly. "Then I guess I need to get my soul back, huh?" I grabbed the bags of clothes and struggled to smile—forced myself to walk as I tried to process what she told me. "Cam's probably waiting for you."

I left her standing there and exiled myself to my room to deal with my discovery and the renewed desperation to regain my mortality.

***

My new problem haunted me, and concentrating on anything besides the auction for my soul was difficult. Sophie left the hospital Friday afternoon, and I felt like a piece-of-crap when I told Matt I would still go to the music festival with him. My best friend showed no sign of disappointment after I told her about my plans. In fact, she was excited about alone time with Andy. I figured they just wanted to make out. Because, I guess they had not become sick of sucking each other's faces while she was in the hospital.

For some reason, I didn't feel the need to call them out on it. My perspective on relationships changed dramatically since I met Lorelei. The new sentimental sappiness still freaked me out a little.

As Matt and I shuffled through the crowd at the festival, I squinted

up at him. He fanned his face, reminding me of the one thing I *did not* miss about being mortal. Hot weather sucked. He grinned down at me and pushed an unkempt strand of hair from his forehead. Some kid wedged between us, his balloon animal squeaking against our faces.

"The end of summer makes me sad," I mused. Summer meant fall and then winter would come. I didn't have a clue about what would become of me after the winter.

"Why?" Matt stopped in front of a drink booth and jiggled two fingers at the vendor. He thrust a bottle of water in my direction. I smiled. He didn't ask questions—he just *accepted*. I frowned at the injured look on his face when he jerked his hand back to prevent touching my knuckles.

Maybe he had a germ complex or something. Hell, did sirens have germs?

I hoped he didn't notice me staring at the spot he nearly touched. "Back to school," I lied.

He opened his water and took a big gulp. "Don't tell me you're worried about school, Goose."

"Maybe a little, bu—"

"Are you guys having fun?" Lorelei trilled from behind us. She promised me she would not show her happy-go-lucky face, and I almost groaned aloud. We turned in sync to see her rushing toward us, dragging Cam along with her. Even though his expression was a bit reluctant, he nodded and smiled.

I didn't want to be so happy to see them together, but I was. Cam needed her.

"Waiting to watch the bands play," I said.

She grinned at me. "You look great today!" She turned to Matt. "Doesn't she look incredible?" I glared at her once Cam's attention caught something else. My clothes—a plaid dress and slouchy suede boots—were spoils from our shopping trip the day before.

Matt tilted his head to the side, gave her a half-smile, and said, "She looks awesome."

Awkward.

Cam cleared his throat a few times and flushed. "Dude, that's my sister," he mumbled.

A dreamy expression plastered on Lorelei's flawless face. "Y'all have fun. We're going to play games." My brother ushered her away from us, but she looked over her shoulder to wink at us.

Could she be any more obvious? Matt stared after her, scratching his head. "Is she always like that?"

I snorted. "That's tame."

He moved closer to me, and the sides of our bodies touched as we pushed through the crowd. "You think it's serious between her and

Cam?"

"I guess."

"He looks happy."

"Yeah, he is." Part of me still hated to admit that aloud because it was like mixing work with family. On the other hand, I also hated seeing the look on her face when she realized each day that she was still immortal. At least the fate of her immortality was not up in the air. Not like mine.

An elderly couple passing by smiled and probably whispered about 'young love'. I wish. At this point, I was almost desperate to find love.

A tingle started at my neck and rippled through my legs. I gently shrugged away from Matt after we stopped to talk to one of his friends. My feet robotically drew me around, and the scent of summery cologne almost knocked me over.

Wyatt.

Blue eyes met mine. At first, he seemed surprised to see me. I guess he didn't understand that Rob occasionally gave me the day off. He dragged his gaze over what I was wearing. Touched his own hair as he contemplated how mine was styled. I wondered if he wanted to lean into me and inhale as he did so many other times.

I told myself he didn't.

His eyes never left my face, but his expression was impossible to decipher. No crooked grin. No frown. Just an odd look I'd never seen. I kept my own face blank, kept my eyes locked with his. The gash above his forehead healed, leaving a puckered scar. He let his hair grow out more, and now, it was almost curly. The blue t-shirt he wore made his eyes seem more vibrant.

I could be a liar and say I didn't miss him.

Still, I lied to the world, and there was no point in being dishonest with myself.

My revulsion finally set in when his friends bounded beside him. Kyle Sanford was one of them. My shoulders tensed as he leered at me. Wyatt yanked his eyes from mine, glaring darkly at Kyle. Golden Boy's arm slid around a redheaded girl's waist, and I almost retched when I recognized her.

I knew Megan Jernigan both by reputation and from two years of being in the same Spanish class. For a moment, I considered warning him that she was the pass-around girl for the football team.

"What's wrong, Goose?" Matt asked, stepping beside me. He peered in the direction my body was turned, growling after he saw Kyle. "That guy is such an asshole."

I turned my back to Wyatt's group and strained a smile. Drowning the steady pound of his heart was a struggle, but somehow, I managed to do it. "Yeah . . . let's just forget we saw him and have a good time."

I would forget seeing Wyatt.
And I'd deal with Kyle later.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

By the time the first band—a local cover group—started playing, I was a zombie. The sun dipped behind the clouds, creating a stunning array of colors, but all my thoughts were on my soul. And of course, Wyatt. When Matt asked me if I wanted to dance, I followed him into the swaying mass, feeling disconnected from my body.

At least the band was incredible. I gripped Matt's shoulder and placed my cheek on his sleeve. When I caught Wyatt staring, I almost jerked away. He stood to the side of the crowd with Megan babbling by his side. His eyes were glued to me. Even from a distance, I could tell see his clenched teeth.

Matt's mouth dropped next to my ear; he whispered about the guitarist being a friend of his, and Golden Boy's entire body tensed. Blatant disgust slinked across his face. It was so wrong to be watching his reaction, but I could not stop.

No way is he jealous.

After all, he told me he did not want to see me anymore. And wasn't he the tool who ended things because of his daddy?

If that's even the truth. He probably just got bored of me.

I dragged my head to Matt's chest. We decided not to dance again after the song ended. Instead, we stood listening to the rest of the set—angsty rock that was reminiscent of my screwed up life.

I put a temporary block on thinking about Golden Boy and the Solstice and concentrated on Kyle. How could anyone miss him? He was obviously drugged up, and I felt bad for Wyatt for being with him. Kyle smirked after hitting on a few girls who passed by. They giggled, leaving me wanting to tell them how stupid they looked and what an evil person he was.

The last thing I should have done was lie to Matt and say I needed to go to the restroom when I saw Kyle walk toward the parking area. That's what happened, though. He crouched between his car and another, smoking up, and I considered turning around in hopes that a cop would wander by and arrest him.

But then, he stumbled to his feet and leered at me through a cloud of smoke. Confronting him seemed like a better solution. "Who are *you*?" he demanded, squinting. I could see him clearly, despite my rage. He realized who I was and flicked his tongue across his lips. "Want to join me? Makes me go longer; you like that, don't you?"

My spine stiffened. I counted. *One . . . two . . . three . . .* I needed to stay calm. Self-control was a good thing. "You're disgusting, and I'm getting sick of you."

"Good god, Brewer. Do you ever cut the whiny victim act? You've

only seen me once this summer," he pointed out, holding up one finger and twirling it as I edged closer. "But, um, I heard you've been seeing Anderson. He won't tell me what he's done with you, but I can imagine."

Self-control was overrated.

An invisible force beckoned me toward him. I shoved him on the car. "When are you going to tell the truth?" He laughed, a high-pitched giggle influenced by his haze. *He isn't scared of me at all.* His vicious smirk made me shudder, and I wanted to hurt him even more.

"What are you talking about, Brewer?"

I pushed back from him, thumping his chest hard. His expression changed to a grimace. Not that I actually cared. "You *know* what I'm talking about."

He trailed his fingers up my thigh. My skin crawled. His hand was rough, but I shoved it away. He looked almost surprised that I was able to overpower him. Maybe he thought I would wimp out and let me taunt him, like I did at The Lighthouse. "Your whore mom?" he drawled.

"You need to tell the truth. That nothing happened."

He shrugged. "Why should I?" When I didn't say anything, he continued, "Besides, she's dead, remember? If the crazy bitch hadn't killed herself, she would've cleared her own name."

My fist slammed into his nose, and blood spurted the front of my dress. It was a shame. I really liked the dress. I stepped back, seething, as Kyle doubled over. He clutched his nose, and a string of expletives burst from his wheezing mouth.

"You fucking psycho."

My lips twitched as he called me a few more names. Being called a bitch was worth watching him whimper in pain after he insulted my mother. "You can't make me do anything," he hissed.

I knelt down and stared him directly in the eye, enraged despite my pleasure at witnessing the syrupy, red liquid ooze past his fingertips. I leaned so close to him that my lips touched his ear. "You'd be surprised what I can make you do, Kyle."

Someone called my name, and for good measure, I elbowed him in the face one last time.

Wyatt stood in front of us, wide-eyed. His face and neck changed colors—first pale then a vibrant burgundy. Why did I miss watching him flush like that? Hell, why did I miss him at all?

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I bit my tongue, expecting him to start spazzing. Maybe even threaten me for kicking his BFF's ass. When he repeated his question, peering down at Kyle, I realized he was not talking to me.

I stood and nodded at Golden Boy. "How's it going?" I asked. Kyle's

blood smeared my elbow and shoes, and I couldn't think of anything better to say.

His mouth fell open, but Kyle interrupted by gurgling another string of insults. "Stupid bitch," he yelled, clamping a scarlet stained hand over his mouth and nose.

"Hey!" Wyatt and I said at the same time. Kyle recoiled. Golden Boy's eyes were not dancing with amusement as they used to. Now, they were dangerous—*violent*. He counted under his breath as he watched his friend slink into his car.

I prayed Kyle's nose was broken. Like, disfiguringly broke. I didn't feel an ounce of regret for hoping that.

"Maybe you and your boyfriend should leave before Sanford calls the cops," Wyatt suggested, keeping his gaze centered on the pointy toes of my shoes.

I didn't see a point in correcting him about Matt. Not like he deserved to know all the details regarding my personal life. I shuffled my feet and prayed the action would annoy him so he would glance up at me. It didn't, and I felt stupid for getting my hopes up. "He's high, so I seriously doubt he'll call *anyone*." Still, I didn't want to return to the festival—Kyle ruined it for me. "You should pick better friends," I said, tossing one last disdainful glare over my shoulder at Kyle. He sat in the front seat of his car with a wad of napkins crushed to his swollen face.

Wyatt crossed his arms over his chest, and as I walked slowly past him, I heard the sharp intake of air. I bit my lip hard. The heat from his blue eyes scorched my back as I walked away.

***

Matt did not question me about the drying blood on my dress and skin as he drove me home. Cam and Lorelei were still out, thankfully, but Dad's truck was in the driveway. Matt parked his Camaro on the curb then turned toward me, grinning. "Can't you ever stay out of trouble, Goose?"

"It follows me around." Despite my playful tone, there was an air of seriousness floating through the tiny car.

He nodded, rapping his fingers against one of the cup holders. His forehead scrunched as if he was thinking about what to say next. Then, without warning, he leaned over and touched his lips to mine. The kiss was so fast I barely knew what was happening.

"I had a good time with you tonight," he whispered once he pulled back.

My eyes flitted down to his fingers; they were white-knuckled and gripping the worn center console. It struck me that he did not touch me.

Not like Wyatt.

Never like Wyatt.

I smiled, bittersweet, and reached for the door handle. “I had fun, too.”

“Beating someone up or with me?” he teased.

“Both.”

He leaned forward, kissing me one last time. His hands never left the console. Matt’s deep inhale definitely reminded me of Golden Boy. “I’ll see you around, Goose.”

I watched the old car speed off, feeling like the biggest tease ever for letting him kiss me while I thought of someone else.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Something, not a soul, begged me to go to the sea.

At first, I tried to avoid the sensation. It was different and sinister, and I worried that Demeter and the hunter set up a trap for me. Nevertheless, the numb weight on my chest told me I *needed* to go to the ocean.

I found myself at Palmetto Dunes, crouched behind the rocks by Wyatt's house like a total creeper. He and his new friends were partying, and I was surprised that one of the stuffy neighbors had not called the cops yet. Most of their group hung around the patio, but Kyle managed to coax a girl with slouched shoulders and mousy brown hair to the edge of the sand.

I felt like a dirty Peeping Tom watching them from the rocks.

They were both messed-up, but I shivered when the girl slumped over onto the ground. Kyle grabbed at her tube top, and I wanted to scream for her to get up—or yell for Wyatt to come see what a classy guy his friend was. Instead, I slid beneath the waves and let the music pour from my throat.

Kyle was the reason for me being here.

I didn't want to hurt anyone but him, so I willed myself to focus. My hands floated above my head and the sea dragged me under as I continued to sing.

Death and chaos wait beneath the waves. The flow of the water guided me, carried me, to where it knew I needed to go. My voice echoed through the depths. *It doesn't hurt at all, Kyle.*

When I emerged, Wyatt's house was nowhere in sight. In fact, none of the McMansions were. Kyle stood waist deep in front of me with a blank look etched across his face.

Once the music stopped, comprehension crept across his features.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, looking around and clutching his bruised nose. I had no plans to hit him again. My new strategy was a better solution to my problem. He took a step backward, forgetting we were in water. I smirked as he went under and snorted when he came up a moment later, sputtering.

"What are you doing?" His voice trembled as I waded closer.

"You said I couldn't make you do *anything*."

He stumbled, flailing and splashing. "No wonder Anderson doesn't want you . . . you're crazy."

His words burned a little.

Okay, a lot . . .

"Hmm, maybe you're right," I said. Music took over me again, and the mystified look consumed his hazel eyes. I beckoned him towards

me until the waves crashed under his chin. He choked on the salt. "Coming clean would have been easier," I whispered.

I stopped the siren song once he was fully submerged because I wanted to see the fear in his eyes. I *needed* to see his flesh change color. He thrashed against me, struggling to return to the surface.

His soul was strong, and it screamed at me. *"What are you doing?"*

"I'm crazy, remember?"

I saw myself in his eyes, gleaming like gold beneath the sea as the color drained from his skin. My lips curled upward at the sight of his face withering. He trembled beneath my grasp.

His body began to slacken. *"What are you?"*

I started to answer him, but someone shook my shoulders hard, and I was positive the hunter found me. Then, a transparent body swam behind Kyle. It was Mom. Her face was an angry mask of clarity.

"Stop it," she said.

"Why?" I challenged.

"Killing him doesn't right a wrong." She broke into a million tiny jets. Tonight, she would not return.

Kyle no longer moved. I wanted to be disobedient and ignore my mother's warning. Then Lorelei's melodic voice intermingled with Mom's in my mind, telling me how much I would regret killing Kyle out of rage.

Reviving him made me sick to my stomach. Nevertheless, the fact that I tried to get rid of him in the first place was worse. Much worse. As I pressed my mouth to his, breathing life into his still body, I despised what I was. I was so messed up and sadistic that my instincts led me right to him.

He vomited in the sand once he came to, and I stood over him, watching. He gasped and wheezed and stared up at me with new eyes. Frightened eyes. "What are you?" It was the same question his soul asked as his body faded.

I shook my head and ran a shaky hand through my soaked hair.

"Tomorrow you will go to whatever authorities you went to when you lied about my mom and tell the truth. I can find you, and I can take you right back under. I'm serious."

Spinning around, I prepared to leave him. He could figure out how to find his way home.

"This is a dream," he muttered.

I stiffened, shook my head, and said, "If you think it is, I'd be more than happy to take you back in." I walked away, counting my heartbeat. That familiar sound was the only thing keeping me sane.

***

Dad summoned me from my bedroom at 10:29 in the morning. "We need you to come in here for a moment, Kiddo," he murmured softly,

tapping on my door.

It was funny, I could not remember dressing in my pajamas, but I was fully clothed as I padded to the door. His face was grim. He struggled to speak, and his hands and voice quivered.

"We need to talk."

Terrified, I followed him into the living room. The sight of Kyle Sanford and both of his parents sitting on our couch made me cringe. Once Kyle's eyes met mine, he recoiled, too.

His mother—a skinny brunette who wore too many bracelets—glowered at him. "*Do* it," she hissed, wringing her hands together.

Dad eased down onto his recliner, and as I stood by his side, I noticed Cam and Lorelei sitting across from us on the piano bench. Her green eyes peered down at a full glass of water. Did I condemn her in my anger? I expected the worse when Kyle started to speak.

"I made it up, okay?" he grumbled.

The silence was agonizing, and my hand crept to my chest. This—*this* moment—was what I wanted and dreamt about, yet it seemed surreal.

"And?" Mr. Sanford probed, slapping the back of Kyle's head. The resulting crack was earsplitting, and I knew it must have hurt. "You've harmed these people enough. Finish so we can deal with you."

"I lied about Mrs. Brewer because she pissed me off, okay? I didn't think things would get out of hand."

Nevertheless, they had, and Kyle's confession came almost fifteen months after the irreversible damage.

Dad's shoulders trembled, and his head drooped. When Cam let out a strangled sound, Lorelei wrapped her arms around him. I squeezed my dad's arm; he touched my hand.

The exchange between my family and Mr. and Mrs. Sanford was a blur. I caught a few of the words used in the conversation like 'attorney' and 'sorry'. Those two words were repetitive.

They only stayed for ten minutes, and Mr. Sanford yelled at Kyle all the way to their fancy Lexus. My dad excused himself to his bedroom once they backed out of our driveway. Cam disappeared, too, claiming he wanted to take a drive alone. I expected Lorelei to admonish me for what I did in hushed tones. Or threaten me and tell me that Hermes or Zeus or whoever wasn't happy.

Instead, she leaned over my trembling body and pressed cool lips to my cheek. "It takes a strong person—even if immortal—to do what you did. I'm proud of you."

I could not bring myself to tell her that my mom was the reason why Kyle still lived.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Dad was happy.

Kyle's confession gave him closure to my mom's suicide. His heart would always ache for her, but the doubt he carried since before she died evaporated. Once Francesca made her decision, I would have finality too. I was willing to give up my chance of ever being mortal again just so my mom wouldn't have to suffer.

The last two days, I returned to the ocean and looked for her. She refused to see me. Her soul was probably still livid over what I planned on doing to Kyle. I figured she would find me once she was ready to talk again.

I hoped that would be soon . . . disappointing her in death was just as bad as when she was fully alive.

One of Matt's friends, the guitarist from the band who played at the festival, invited us to an end of summer get-together at his parent's beach house. Andy talked Sophie's parents into letting her go, even though they were still on edge about what happened to her at Romano's.

I asked Matt to pick me up at The Lighthouse, and before I left home, I stuffed all of Wyatt's clothes neatly into a box. I had no reason to hold on to them. He made it clear he did not want to see me again.

Golden Boy's new car and a shiny red Honda that I assumed belonged to Audrey were the only cars parked in his circular driveway. I was relieved that his parents' cars w**e**ren't around. His dad was my least favorite person, right under Kyle, and I did not want to lose control and tell him he was an epic dumbass. As I walked to the front door, I thought about what could have been. Deciding against ringing the doorbell, I dumped the box on the front step, turned around and whispered, "I will have a good time tonight."

"Charlotte?"

Slowly, I faced Wyatt. He bent over to pick up the box. "Hey," I said. *Lame.*

He hopped off the steps, a smile stretching across his face. Dimples. God, his dimples were glorious. Everything about his expression was beautiful, but his eyes were what struck me. They were vivid and truthful and . . . apologetic. As if he forgot the last couple of times we spoke. Then he lowered his eyelashes and the look was gone.

He swallowed hard, fingers pulling the box closer to his chest. "What are you doing here?"

Weakly, I lifted a hand and motioned to his clothes. "Wanted to give you your shi—your *stuff*—back. Figured you might need it. Because I was cleaning my room." *Because, some part of me hoped I might see you.*

"Making room for band tees and black wrist bands?" he asked, his bright smile suddenly drawn and forced.

Seriously? A Matt jab?

"If I were, I probably wouldn't have to give *those* back. Guess that's the difference between the two of you." I spun around and was determined to get the hell away from Golden Boy, to stop the hypnotic pull he had over me.

I heard the box drop then his hand fell onto my shoulder. He sighed. "Char, wait."

"Why?"

He moved his cheek by my hair, but I chose not to turn around. I already let down my guard too much for Wyatt Anderson. "Please stay."

"Your dad."

"I don't care."

But I cared about letting Matt down and standing him up. Especially after Wyatt wussed out on me before. I pulled away from him, shrugged, and fought to laugh. "Already made plans to go to a party with a friend. But maybe next time, right?"

I almost ran to my car, and I was shocked to see him still standing in the driveway. He watched as I drove away.

***

The small get-together turned into a massive beach party. Matt was full of surprises; the unearthing that he could play the guitar took my mind off Golden Boy. Crowds congregated around him, listening to him play an old Rolling Stones song.

"Tattoos and talent," Sophie squealed from beside me. "I'm in love."

I crinkled my nose but laughed. "Don't you have a boyfriend?"

She glanced sideways at Andy who was listening intently to Matt's performance and shrugged. "Good point."

He played the last cadence of the song and swept into another. The acoustic melody wasn't anything I ever heard on the radio. I listened to it before, though. To my shame, I even sang it.

Death and chaos wait beneath the waves . . .

It was the Lure. Matt looked at me, and I waited for him to give me some sign that the brown eyes I stared into belonged to him and not Demeter. *But do I really want this to be him? If it is, then he knows.* He winked and continued to play.

Sophie tugged on my arm. "Hey? Dude, you okay?"

"I need water," I choked. I pushed through the throng of people, wanting to escape and figure out why Matt knew *that* song. *Maybe he heard the Lure. Maybe . . .*

I was getting sick of being uncertain about everything. The sound of a heart beating louder than all the others turned my stomach even

more. As I moved away from everyone else, it became stronger until it seemed like it was inside my head. The hunter was at this party.

I glanced over my shoulder into the dark and saw nothing. Nevertheless, as I walked faster, his heartbeat sped up.

Would he try to drag me into the water? I racked my brain, trying to remember if Lorelei told me that we had to be in water for him to kill me. The sound was right in my eardrums, now, and I looked behind me again. I slammed into someone who was in front of me and screamed.

Strong arms crushed around me, and the heartbeat faded. The throb coming from the person standing in front of me was just as familiar. I stepped back. "Charlotte, what's wrong?"

Golden Boy.

"I'm fine." Still, my hand spread over my chest as if I expected my own heartbeat to start racing. It dragged at its usual sluggish, immortal pace. "Why are you here?"

"Had to see you," he said. He drew his eyebrows together and pulled his lips in a little. Every few seconds, he swallowed hard then took a huge, unsteady breath.

What the hell was that supposed to mean? He was doing a good job of avoiding me so far. "You followed me?" When he nodded, I rolled my eyes. "So in other words, you're stalking me?" Still, the way he said he needed to see me, breathless and without bullshit excuses, made me shiver. I wasn't about to let him know that he had that effect on me. "Well?"

"I don't want you with him."

"Excuse me?"

Even in the darkness, his blue eyes pleaded with me as he stepped closer to me. "That guy with the tattoos. I want you, Charlotte. And I don't care what my dad says or what people think."

Of all the times for him to make a declaration of . . . *want.* He couldn't have said any of this at the festival? No. Because ever since I met Golden Boy, my life was difficult. He had to wait until after I decided that I was completely done with him. Had to make his big revelation at the exact moment when Matt was playing eerie siren songs on a guitar and the hunter decided to start harassing me on land. "Your timing sucks," I said.

"Go with me somewhere? Just to talk. Just to—" He held up his hands in frustration as he tried to figure out what to say.

Why did he have to look at me like that? Why was he dragging me back to him? "I came here with friends," I said. "I told you that before. I can't leave. No, I take that back. I *won't* leave." It was a lie. I was just too chicken to go with him because I was afraid of putting myself out there again just so he could walk away. I intended to ditch

the party as soon as possible to get away from the acoustic Lure and the threat of the hunter.

For the second time that evening, I retreated like a coward and left him standing alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I ignored everyone's calls.

Matt continued to leave messages, each one slightly more urgent than the last, wanting to know why I left the party early two nights ago. What was I supposed to tell him?

Oh, yeah, you were kind of playing the song I use to kill men.

The terrifying part was that maybe he already knew exactly what the song was for, what I was. Of course, that made no sense . . . unless he was the d-bag trying to off me.

A platinum head poked into my bedroom. Lorelei. She flicked on the light switch and frowned. "Are you sure you don't want to go?"

Dad was working third shift at the hospital, and she and Cam made dinner plans in Boston. When she invited me, I felt like the loser third wheel nobody wanted to ask out on a date. I mean, I realized they wanted to include me in their relationship or whatever, but I couldn't stand the overly sappy PDA.

I twisted my lips into what I hoped resembled a smile. It didn't feel like one. "I'm good. You guys have fun," I said.

"You can't just lie in bed all the time. I know you're worried about the Winter Solstice and Demeter, but try to put it out of you mind. Go out and see Andrew and Sophie or spend time with Thelxiope."

"Fran and I despise each other," I reminded her. Shunning my friends to sulk over the injustice of immortality and the hunter seemed like a better way to spend my time. At least until I figured out what to do about the soul auction. Tapping my finger on the alarm clock, I said, "Besides, it's past eight. I'm not hurting anything by going to bed. You should be *happy* I'm trying to stay out of trouble." I rolled over so I wouldn't have to look at her.

She grumbled about me being a class-A social outcast then flounced off. Ten minutes later, the front door slammed and her precious Shelby's engine came to life. I stretched out on the floor, examining my glow-in-the-dark ceiling. The stars brought my conversation with Matt to the front of my mind. That night, at Plum Cove, his knowledge of the gods and mythology staggered me.

"He knows something," I whispered. "Effing creeper."

The doorbell rang shortly after Lorelei and Cam left. I rolled my eyes. Getting rid of them was impossible. I expected to see him on the front porch, complaining about how he forgot something important, like his wallet. Maybe he left his key to the house in the kitchen drawer again.

Instead, I flung the door open to come face to face with Golden Boy.

"What the hell are you doing here?" My greeting was just a tad

ruder than it should have been, but this was a surprise. Showing up unannounced *was* rude, even though I did the same to him several times before. But then, things between us were different now. I wore a tank top and underwear, and I struggled to pull my shirt around my hips.

Shrugging his shoulders, he flushed. “Your brother’s girlfriend called me, and—”

I started to slam the door in his face, peeved that Lorelei took the liberty to interfere with my life when she constantly preached about the horrors of meddling. He stuck his foot in the crack of the door. “Wait! Can you just talk to me?”

Our neighbor jogged by the house and did a double take at the sight of me standing in the doorway skimpily dressed. God, someone was setting me up for extreme fail. I groaned and shuffled out of the way so Wyatt could come in.

“I need pants,” I snapped, skulking to my bedroom. He followed close behind. As I scoured my drawers for anything that would cover my butt, he leaned against the doorframe.

“I can’t stay away from you, Charlotte.”

My head popped up. He said the same thing a few nights ago, but this was 50 times more frustrating. Now he was in my house, trapping me. “What changed?”

I missed his flush, and I bit my lip as it deepened. At last, he sighed. “I told you, I don’t want you with that other guy.”

“What if what you want isn’t possible?”

“What if I think it is? Because, I’ll keep coming around. I was stupid before. And I can’t stand to think of your new boyfriend touching you.”

I whirled on him and threw a pair of old gym shorts at his face. He captured them against his chest. “Just because you see me with a guy, doesn’t mean I’m dating him. *Or* having sex with him. You, on the other hand . . . ugh.”

He caught my wrist. “What?”

“Megan.” Why did I sound so jealous? *Why* did Lorelei call him to my house in the first place?

“Not even like that.” When he considered my expression, a look that clearly said I thought he was a total fraud, he continued. “Megan is a friend, but I don’t want her. She isn’t you—never will be. You are *always* on my mind. Your smell, your touch . . . the way your lips taste.” He dropped my arm and raked his hands through his hair and down the sides of his face. “What’d you do to me?”

“Creep,” I whispered. Still, I felt a strange satisfaction knowing he thought of me.

“So you’re saying you’re over me?”

“Maybe I was never for you. Maybe I never had any feelings for you whatsoever.” My voice shook, and he moved close to me again. “Besides, you’re leaving town soon.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh come on, boys like you come to town during the summer and find some stupid local to screw around with, then you leave.”

“Haven’t you listened to a thing I said this summer? My family lives here permanently, meaning, we’re not going anywhere.”

Oh.

“I don’t care,” I said.

Circling his thumb over my lips, he murmured, "*You're* lying.” Lip-gloss smudged his fingertip, and he grinned down at it. I froze when his palms stroked my cheeks. Shivered as his fingers found my temples and threaded through my hair.

I inhaled—a stupid decision because the scent of his cologne flowed up my nostrils—and squashed my eyes shut. "What?" The voice speaking to him didn’t belong to me. It was too needy, too breathless.

He slanted his lips over mine and pinned me against the wall next to my desk. His mouth was warm. Warm, soft, and hard, all at the same time. I grasped the wooden edge of the desk. Knocked a stack of books to the floor. *His* hands, the same ones I dreamt about, rubbed my shoulders, the spot behind my ears, my neck.

I should have been disgusted when he inhaled my hair. Should have pushed him away.

But as he leaned forward, breathing me in, I forgot how to speak.

I finally opened my mouth to protest. To tell him I didn't want him, that I did not need *this* drama. He shut me up, crushing his mouth to mine. His fingers snaked behind me and dug into my lower back. "You squint when you lie," he said.

I loathed him for assuming he was so well-informed about me.

Arching my back, I moved toward him. The pit of my stomach burned, and my arms were heavy as they draped around his neck. *Shouldn’t immortality make me immune to needing this boy?*

He pulled away, cupped my face, and pressed the corner of his mouth to my forehead. “I want to be with you. And this time, no doubt about what we are. Charlotte, I—” He was cut off by the sound of something falling in the kitchen. “Is your dad home?”

I tripped across the room and peeked out the blinds. Lorelei’s car wasn’t in the driveway or the curb and neither was Dad’s truck. I grasped the windowsill as the heavy heartbeat of the hunter resonated through the house and overpowered the sound of Wyatt’s heart. “Oh shit.”

I guess the tone of my voice triggered some protective instinct in Golden Boy. He opened my door, letting it bang against the wall. A

chair scraped across the linoleum kitchen floor and deafening footsteps went through the living room. Then the front door slammed.

Apparently, Wyatt was into heroics because he bounded through the house, determined to catch the intruder. He was too late. The hunter was already gone; I could not hear his heartbeat anymore.

Turning back toward the window, I caught a glimpse of him from behind. Short, with dark, spiky hair. A total creep I would give anything to get rid of so he would stop screwing with me.

"Charlotte!" Wyatt yelled.

I walked apprehensively to the kitchen, and my throat tightened when I turned around the corner. He stood in the middle of the room, salt surrounding him. It poured off the table and counters onto the floor. Wet footprints tracked through the room.

Staring down at the mess, he turned in a circle. "Who was that? What is *this*?"

I grabbed the broom, though it would do nothing to help the disaster. "A prank," I said, straining a smile. "They've been doing it since my mom died." The truth was the practical jokes lasted just a couple months and didn't go any further than ignorant calls. Luckily, he did not know that. "You should probably leave. I'll clean this up."

He pulled the broom from my hands. "You're shaking. I don't give a shit what you say; there's no way I'm leaving you alone tonight."

***

The uncomfortable burn over my heart shook me awake, and my eyes pulled apart to Wyatt touching my chest. My room was dark. I stretched out on the mattress, trying to remember falling asleep. He helped me clean the kitchen and afterward, lay beside me in my bed. We did not talk. I merely buried my face into his chest, closed my eyes, and tried to forget everything but him.

"What happened here?" His forehead creased into a frown when he touched the spiral scar. I caught his hand, pushing it down, and yanked my top back into place. He traced the curve of my side and drummed his fingers over belly button. His eyes remained locked on my chest. Finally, he looked at my face, and his expression softened. He reached out to touch my cheek. "I'm sorry."

I shifted just a little, and a few strands of my hair clouded his face. He twisted the locks around four of his fingers, his eyes closing as they unraveled and fell against the pillows. "Are you?"

"I never meant to hurt you before."

Our hands touched.

I wanted to fib again and inform him he never hurt me. Remind him we never even dated.

Not when our lips met. Not when he pulled me to him again.

And certainly not when I realized I had fallen for Wyatt Anderson.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

He was gone in the morning, but my room still smelled like Summer Boy. It was tragic that I kept sinking my face into his pillow. I was glad he could not see me; I'd hate to hear some lame remark, calling me out. As I made my bed, carefully smoothing down the sheets that he slept on, I bit my lip to repress a smile.

My buzz was ruined only moments later when Lorelei stopped by with bad news: Francesca left. She bailed while Cam and Lorelei cavorted around Boston. To be honest, I should have anticipated something bad to happen. It was such a selfish and bitchy move that I was angry with *myself* for hoping Fran would screw up the nerve to be proactive. Maybe she would show up again during the Solstice and wait, gleefully, for one of the shady gods to take control of my soul.

"The hunter was here last night," I said, as Lorelei fussed around the kitchen. She was cooking a breakfast for Dad and Cam that looked and smelled heinous.

She dropped a few more dollops of honey into the saucepan and it fizzled over the excessively high heat. "You shouldn't joke like that just because you're upset." The singsong, nervous voice returned.

"Ask Wyatt. He was here and left salt and water all over the kitchen. Sick joke, huh?"

She swung around abruptly. "Well, did you get a good look at him?"

"No."

Plopping her hands on her hips, she tapped the toe of one of her yellow platforms on the floor. The sound was unnerving, especially when I had so much on my mind. After she thought about the situation for a few minutes, she turned to the stove again. "You need to be cautious."

"Yeah, I kind of figured that out."

My sarcasm did not faze her. "Demeter's hunters don't go through so much trouble. They can't hurt you on land, so I'm confused. And worried."

If Lorelei was worried then I knew I should be running around, screaming erratically about the end of the world. It was only a matter of time before something horrible occurred. "Do you think it's about the Solstice?"

She leaned over her concoction, slumping her shoulders and head. "Yes, I do." She regained her composure, danced around in a circle, and gave me one of her I'm-a-moody-psycho smiles. "Don't worry, we'll figure it out!"

Sure we would, just like we figured out how to force Francesca to make a decision about my mom.

***

Earlier in the week, I made plans to have lunch with Andy, Sophie, and Matt at the Sunshine Café, but now I regretted making the commitment. Not only was I livid about Francesca punking out, but I was still troubled about Matt's eerie guitar solo. Plus, I kind of felt like the ultimate traitor sitting next to him. Didn't I sleep in the same bed as Golden Boy just last night?

Damn my foolish morality.

I poked at my lettuce, wishing my friends would turn their heads so I could dump salt into my water. My brain was so hazy that I couldn't concentrate on what they were talking about. When Nicola, the server from hell, strutted to our table, I kept my eyes on Matt. His face was a mask of confusion during the excruciating meal, and I decided to confront him about my concerns once we ditched Andy and Sophie. I also wanted to come clean about Wyatt.

Still, I was not ready to deal with talking to him. Not yet. We sat together on the pier talking about colleges. He was excited about starting school next spring, and I smiled as I stared out at the ocean. I couldn't help but nervously sink my teeth into my lip when he talked about me visiting him.

"Matt, that song you played at your friend's party, why—"

"My mom played it for me when I was a kid," he said.

That explained little about how or why his mom knew the Lure. I didn't know much about his mother, other than the fact she died when he was ten, before he moved to Gloucester. Cocking his head to the side, the corner of one of his lips twitched. Wind swept strands of his hair into his eyes. The scent of menthol hit me in the face. "Why do you ask?"

"Just kind of different, that's all," I said.

That *wasn't* all. The troublesome siren intuition kicked in, and at that moment, I knew there was something more to him.

I'm an idiot because I've known for a while.

My opportunity to tell him about Wyatt came as he walked me to my Jeep. He asked me about catching a movie on Saturday, dark eyes sparkling with anticipation. I felt as if someone gouged me in the forehead. Sagging my shoulders, I fixated my eyes on a piece of chewing gum stuck to the asphalt.

"You okay, Goose?"

I dug my fingers into my bag and smiled. Because a sweet expression would ease the blow of rejection, right? *I don't want to hurt you. But I want the truth from you, too.* "I don't want to lead you on," I blurted.

His nose wrinkled, and he sat on the bumper. He didn't seem to mind that it was filthy. Maybe he just wasn't paying attention. "Huh?"

"I feel like I'm leading you on. And if I have, I'm sorry," I said.

He smiled. Once I realized how strained it was, I wilted. "The guy from the festival?"

Was I so ridiculously pathetic that he noticed? My chest burned, and I felt the urge to run away. I did not *want* to do this. "Yes."

He shook his head as if he understood. His shrug was nonchalant and light-hearted, but I wondered if he had an inner-voice nagging at *him* to say or do something else. "That's cool, Goose."

"Really?"

"I like you a lot, but I don't think you've been a tease—at least, not too bad." He winked. "That guy is lucky. It's for the best, though, I guess. I was actually going to tell you this over the weekend, but I'm spending some time with my dad. Helping him with his work, you know?"

No, I *didn't* know. He never mentioned his father, just his grandfather and occasionally his mom. I shook my head a little too fast. "Yeah? That's awesome."

He leaned down. As he grazed his lips across the side of my mouth, I shut my eyes. His fingers slid down my face, igniting my skin. The electric charge from his touch was stronger than the jolt I felt touching Wyatt the first time we met. My hand flew to my cheek. He felt the back of it and the charge continued to pulse through my body.

What is he doing to me?

"So this will probably be the last time I see you for a while." He ignored my stunned expression, didn't seem to mind that I took a slow and unsteady step back toward my car.

He pushed his hands in his pockets. "Stay out of trouble, Goose. And . . . be careful. Promise me you'll watch your back, please?"

I wanted to scream. Loudly. "I'll try."

He waved a tattooed arm at me before climbing in his car. I slid into my seat, watching the Camaro speed off. At last, I examined my reflection in the rearview mirror and the part of my cheek that he touched. The shimmering bronze impression of five fingertips decorated my skin.

I rested the back of my head on the headrest and bit my lip.

"*Unless they let us know who they are, their identities can only be revealed through touch*," Lorelei had said when we talked about demigods.

Matt had royally duped me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lorelei was not around to listen to me rant about my epic Matt revelation. Once again, she and Cam were spending a romantic evening in Boston. I was too dazed to gag over it. After I recovered some from the shock, I called Matt. Voicemail boxes and I are old friends; I left him numerous messages. I wish I knew where he lived. Even if I did, I was not so sure he'd answer the door.

"Matt, it's me again. Please call back. We seriously need to talk, and —" Hands touched my shoulders. I slammed my phone shut. I twisted my body, looked up, and strained a tight smile at Wyatt.

He laughed at the pointed look I gave him. "Did I scare you?" He'd invited me over to the McMansion a few hours ago, and at first, I was awkward about our new relationship status. It was going to take some getting used to and flaunting it around in front of his father seemed like a crap idea. I told him his dad would probably have a breakdown when he saw us together. He insisted that his parents would not kick me out or call the cops.

Since Kyle was making the rounds and admitting what a lying jerk he was, that made me semi-decent in Mr. Anderson's eyes. Did I appreciate his sudden approval? Hell no, but at least it was a start.

Wyatt eased down beside me on the wooden patio planks and stared out at the sea. Tonight, we said few words, but I didn't push him away when his fingertips moved across the back of my hand then touched mine. Realizing that I was crazy about him and knowing that he didn't return those emotions made me feel worse for Lorelei.

"Thinking about me?" he asked, grinning.

Sort of. But mostly, I'm thinking about an asshole who lied to me. Not that I could tell Golden Boy that. My face was proof of Matt's deception. The iridescent mark was slowly fading, but Wyatt had noticed it as soon as he picked me up. He'd cocked his head to one side, furrowed his forehead, and said, "You forgot to spray the rest of you." Despite the seriousness of the situation, I'd laughed. I wished that I could blame the scene with Matt on a cheap can of bronzer.

"What'd your dad say about the break-in?"

Matt's face evaporated from my thoughts; an image of my kitchen doused with salt and water replaced it. I'd promised Golden Boy that I would tell my father about the incident, but of course I hadn't. Dad would lose it. Dealing with the cops for a crime they'd never solve wasn't exactly the best end to summer vacation. Wyatt continued to stare at me, like he was waiting for me to say something about last night, so I just shook my head.

He pulled me to him. "You're quiet. Scary. Don't you want to argue

with me or call me Golden or something?"

No. I just wanted quietness, peace—a normal life.

"*Char?*" Mom's calm, even voice interrupted my sulking. Wyatt jumped as I catapulted from his lap. I waited for her to speak again, praying that I did not imagine it in a fit of 'psycho siren' depression.

Wyatt's hand touched my neck and trailed down my spine to the small of my back. "You alright?"

She spoke again. This time, her voice was loud and strong. "*I'm ready*." For a moment, I wondered if this was a treacherous hunter trap. I refused to wait and find out. Mom called for me. No screaming. No crying. Just a soft whisper that reminded me of her knocking on my door each morning and telling me to get ready for school.

"Can I have a glass of water?" I wheezed.

He smiled crookedly. "It would be nice if you drank something besides water, but yeah. I'll be right back."

As soon as he disappeared into the house, I raced towards the sea. My decision was hasty, and I had to admit I felt like an idiot as I stumbled over my own feet. Not that I gave a crap. Her relaxed tone made me wonder why she needed me.

Gave me delirious hope.

I threw myself into the ocean, letting it pull my weightless body down. There were other souls around, and I promised I would guide them later. For now, I just wanted to find my mom.

She found *me* after only a minute. It seemed as if the thud of my heart would make my head ignite. I dug my fingernails into my palms and waited for her to speak. Waited for her to put me out of my misery with an explanation.

My mom looked the same, yet completely different. Because this time, she smiled. Torment did not distort her liquid face. This time, she was at peace.

"*I was beginning to worry about how long it would take you*," she said, hovering in front of me. Her hand grasped mine. We swam in silence to the platform with her leading the way. She'd waited so long for this moment that she could guide *me*. Realizing that made my chest burn. "*The blue-eyed woman helped me*." She gestured to the dazzling path below us. "*She said she'd let you do the rest*."

Francesca—in all of her spoiled craziness—had not just vanished without keeping her word. Too bad she never felt the urge to tell me what she did before leaving. I wouldn't complain, though. Perhaps she and Mom conspired to keep this a surprise. I wanted to remind my mother how much I despised surprises, but I squeezed her sheer hand.

We traveled down the path until we floated just above the radiance. The shades of pink and gold reflected off Mom's beaming face as I turned to her. "I'm sorry about Kyle," I said.

Clear strands of hair wrapped around both of us when she shook her head and touched her fingers to my lips. "*You have good intentions. But you're like your dad and Cam*"—she pressed her hand harder against my mouth as I tried to protest—"*even though you swear you're not.*" She lowered her eyes to the whirlpool and smiled. "*Then again, if you weren't so hasty, I might have had to wait another fifty or sixty years. Take care of Dan and Cameron. And help Lorelei. I have a feeling everything will work out between her and your brother. Just don't forget me, okay?*"

I didn't ask how she knew Lorelei. I just tried to figure out how to say goodbye. Never got that chance before, and now, I was scared to. This was a good farewell, what I wanted for her. I felt selfish for wanting to keep her around longer.

"I could never forget you," I whispered. "I love you, Mom."

She dipped her face beside mine. I shivered at the sensation of her lips sliding down my cheek. "*Love you too, Char. I know we'll see each other again.*" She walked backward, granting me one last smile before bursting into a spiral of tiny jets that danced into the vortex.

"Bye Mom."

***

I resurfaced on another part of the beach, far away from Wyatt's house so I could regroup before returning to him. No doubt, my excuse would be far-fetched. I was drenched from head to toe. "Well, he *is* used to screwy stuff happening whenever I'm around water," I murmured.

"Yeah, I am. But this definitely is new." His voice shook me, and I almost dived under again in hopes that he didn't take a good look at me. Trying to convince him that he was delusional would be pointless and a waste of my time. It hadn't worked very well when I told him he imagined certain details of his car crash so I was definitely screwed now. I swam over to where he knelt down on one of the rocks. He tilted his head to one side and pursed his lips together until they turned white. "You really *aren't* like other girls."

"No, I don't think so either," I said, gripping the craggy surface for support. I waited for him to run off screaming 'mermaid' or 'fish girl', but he rubbed his fingers on my moist cheek. "You're not freaking out. Why aren't you freaking out?"

Don't get me wrong, I didn't exactly want to witness Golden Boy hyperventilating and breaking out in a rash. Still, if it happened, I wouldn't blame him. So why was he so calm?

He shrugged, looking surprised that he hadn't gone into shock. At any moment, it would set in—I was 98% positive. Would he run back to his house and tell his parents I was a witch? Or maybe even a demon? I bet money his dad would totally buy his story, and I was

glad Massachusetts had done away with that nasty habit of hanging "witches."

"I've always known there was something different about you. Ever since the night I wrecked my truck. You lied then, by the way. Just like you lied about telling your dad about the guy who broke into your house," he said. "But your squinting is kind of sexy, so that's okay."

Hearing him say those words aloud should have made me nervous, but he was smiling. And I relaxed. "Aren't you going to ask me what's wrong with me? Aren't you scared shitless about what I might do to you?"

Leaning forward, he laughed. I knew he was fighting to sound so collected, so indifferent. "Maybe I'll get wasted tonight and then you can tell me. Don't think it makes a difference. All I know is that I want to be with you."

What was wrong with him? He'd witnessed me staying underwater for God knows how long, and he *still* thought we belonged together? "I could hurt you," I warned. "Actually, I can make you kill yourself."

His mouth was inches from mine. I recalled the painting Lorelei directed me to the day she told me about being a siren, the one of her sitting on the rock staring down at the love-struck mortal. The corners of my lips twisted up as I realized how Wyatt and I were the exact opposite.

I didn't get to enjoy the moment for very long. Something clamped around my foot. I swallowed hard, trying to remember how to speak so I could tell Wyatt to get the hell away from me. I only managed to stare up at him with enlarged eyes and a wide open mouth. The rock I held onto was slippery as I tried to keep my head above water.

He grabbed my wrists. His eyes were just as big as mine and he blinked, like he was desperately attempting to figure out what was happening. "Char . . ."

The hunter wrapped his arms around my knees. Wyatt's grip on my arms loosened and as I went under, my chin slammed into the rocks. The hunter locked me into a chokehold and quickly found my chest.

Tonight my heart would burst.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The thud of my heartbeat began to slow and break, as my assailant turned me to face him. I take that back, the hunter was a girl. Fun. Matt was a demigod and his crazy ex-girlfriend was trying to kill me. "Surprised?" Eva asked, sneering. She looked like a boy, though, with her crude, self-inflicted haircut.

I squirmed in agony. "Mostly just disappointed I didn't figure you out sooner. You were in my house last night."

Her mouth stretched into a smirk. "I came to drag you away, by the hair if I had to. Important people want you dead." A storm loomed under us, but this time, she willed it to pull us down. She spun me in front of her, locking her arms back around my neck.

"Funny, Demeter can't be all that important. I just heard of her this summer." I wondered if my smartass comment was worth the way she squished the shell deeper into my flesh. It seared until I swore I could smell my burning skin, and I decided the barb wasn't.

"Are you really that stupid? I mean, is it that hard for you to figure out what's going on around you?" She pulled my head back until I could look at her face at an angle. "I do nothing for her," she hissed.

It was hard to figure out anything while she drained my life, but the one name I dreaded to say slipped from my lips. "For Matt then?"

She nodded and let my head snap forward. "He owes her, and I want him. She can't kill him but boy can she really make his life hell. Do you think I can just sit by and watch him suffer?" she demanded, squeezing her cheek to mine. When I didn't answer her question, she threw her head back and shrieked. "I despise you, siren! Not only does destroying you get me exactly what I want, I'm also doing the world a favor by getting rid of vermin. Once you're gone . . ."

Eva had some deep-rooted issues that killing me definitely would not fix. She was more than a little insane, and I wanted to tell her that her bargain with Demeter or Matt or whoever cost her soul. That even if she did kill me, she was screwed once the Solstice came. However, I couldn't speak. I could barely *move*.

"He'll love *me* once you're gone," she said. Her voice was so broken that it sounded like she was crying. "And he'll forget about you."

My heart had slowed to an excruciating four beats. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four.* I couldn't fade away. Not now. Not when I was just starting to realize so much about myself. "The gods don't care what happens to you," I wheezed through the pain. She yanked my head back again so I could see her amused face.

I felt the pressure of her touch as she pulled my chin up. She wanted to see my fear, I was sure of it, and I bit my tongue to keep my

face blank. Demeter's shell made me feel everything physically happening to me. If wasn't on a quick path to an unmarked watery grave, I would have savored the moment. "Don't say that, you disrespectful bitch."

I tried to come up with something to say—one last retort before I was gone and she held what was left of me in a little shell—but my words came out gurgled and incoherent. I was only half-conscious of another body plunging into the water and knocking Eva off me. Wyatt. Oh god, why did he always have to play the part of the chivalrous boy?

I sank.

The sea pulled my limp, frozen body into its depths. It was beautiful and scary and tormenting. This was nothing like death by drowning. Drowning constricted my throat, weighed my body down.

This just constricted my heart.

Hands, transparent and strong, pulled me back this time. The souls I promised to lead later pulled me up and several pairs of liquid lips moved in unison, willing me to fight for Wyatt. For myself.

An unbearable ache slithered through my heart, but I knew I could not focus on that. Not while Golden Boy was trying to be Superman. He was a lot bigger than her, but he was also a gentleman. He would never attack her. Plus, Eva was surprisingly strong for her size. I swam toward them in time to see one flick of her arm send him flailing into the darker depths I'd just come from.

I never needed a hero.

But I wanted him.

I slammed into Eva's petite body, and the shell slipped from her grip. It began to spiral down, and it would have been lost to the sea if it were not attached to a long yellow ribbon. We both eyeballed it. Her eyes flitted to Wyatt sinking deeper and deeper then back to me. She expected me to save him first. Anticipated it. She anticipated wrong.

We lunged for the shell at the same time. My height worked in my advantage. I reached it first, securing it tightly in my palm.

"She'll just make a new one," she warned, swimming backwards as I moved close. An edgy glint flashed in her eyes.

Francesca's words played in my head as Eva and I circled each other. "*This one is different—I don't think he has a soul*," she whispered as she stared out in fear at the ocean. "If she does, you won't be around to see it," I said.

"You can't kill me, silly siren. Nymphs are immortal."

A nymph. Yeah, maybe Eva was right about one thing: my perception skills were sucktastic. No wonder she trailed after Matt with that infatuated, dopey look.

“So am I,” I whispered. “I’m just curious about one thing, though.”

“And what’s that?”

“Why’d you give your soul up?”

Her already giant eyes widened and she exhaled. She knew her mistake. When she cast a quick glance over her shoulder, at Wyatt, I seized the opportunity. I tackled her and smashed the shell over her heart. “And by the way, letting him use you was a *bad* idea.”

She writhed in agony, screaming and pleading for his help as her heart swirled into her own weapon. Its distinctive beat slowed, surprisingly faster than mine did, and her youth and beauty drained away. She looked withered, like an 80-year-old woman. “You won’t win,” she slurred.

The last few threads of life sifted from her body and into the shell. She was no longer solid. Dragging her fingers down her transparent face, she screamed, and then dissolved into the Atlantic.

Even though she’d tried to kill me all summer, I couldn’t help regretting her death.

***

As I straddled Wyatt, clamping my mouth over his, the situation was déjà vu. This time, reviving him took a while. When he convulsed and spat salt water onto the front of my shirt, I kept a straight face, even though it grossed me out.

He jerked my body to his, just as he did weeks before, but his mouth was fierce, demanding, and brilliant. “What happened?”

“You were very brave,” I said.

He stretched out in the sand. I lay beside him. He took a few choppy breaths and coughed before speaking. “You’re lying again.”

“Yes . . . but it’s a good lie.” I rolled onto my side and smiled down at him. “Sometimes it’s better to lie.”

Our mouths touched, and his hand expanded over my heart. The mark from the shell was burgundy and flamed under the moon. “This isn’t going to be an everyday thing, is it?”

I sat up, lifting my hand in an oath. “I swear on my honor as a siren that I will never Lure or drown you. You know, unless you really piss me off.”

His blue eyes were wide saucers, and his mouth hung open. For a second, I definitely thought he would run away. Then he grinned, lowered his head to the sand, and laughed. “A siren, huh?” I nodded. “I think digesting *this* will take a keg,” he said.

We both jumped as a flash of lightning illuminated the sky. A crash of thunder followed a second later, and it seemed as if the ground around us shook.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

For some screwed-up reason, maybe the fabled siren connection, I felt the need to go see Lorelei late that evening. The storm rattled her tiny cottage, and I rushed inside without knocking. She rested, stretched out on the couch, with Cam fussing over her.

I snorted. "Spoiled much?"

She squirmed to sit up and winced. "Char! I'm so glad you're okay!"

I must have interrupted make-out hour, because Cam frowned. "What're you doing here?"

I made a face at him. "I needed to see her. What are you doing here?"

He grunted. "She said the same thing about you a couple hours ago. You two are like ESP twins. It's weird." Thrusting his hand out at her, he dropped two small pills onto her lap. "Here's your pain meds."

She was pretending to be hurt. That was an all-time low for her. Now I had one more lie to maintain, and I made a mental note of remembering that she was supposedly on a prescription. Her green eyes burned a hole in my face. Then she dropped them to my chest, centering in over my heart. "Is everything *fine*?"

"For now," I said, shaking my head. I tossed the shell onto her lap. "I think that belongs to you. Look, it even has a pretty yellow ribbon for you."

Her bottom lip quivered. Was she kidding? Francesca's acting had nothing on this girl. God, I wanted to tell her to suck it up, that sirens never cried, as tears shimmered in her eyes.

Then I stiffened. Because, sirens *could not* cry. If I could still feel pain, my neck would have throbbed from the way it snapped to the side. I channeled Dad, tapping my foot as I waited for her to explain the tears. She beamed and for the first time, I noticed her swollen ankle propped up on a pillow.

Wiggling her foot, she clapped her hands. It was obvious she never had an injury before because her neurotic bouncing suddenly stopped. She squealed in misery. "I sprained my ankle!"

Lorelei was mortal. She was ordinary, fragile. She could eat real food and stop stressing over not having a soul. She would die someday, and not because a goddess hated her.

She was absolutely lucky.

My eyes darted from her to Cam, and though he scowled, I knew he was happy. He had to be. After all, Lorelei recovered her soul. Her heart raced and thumped in her chest. She pointed down at her ankle again, proud of the fact that it was a blotchy, pale blue.

It looked nasty.

Cam said four - letter words as he plopped a bag of ice onto her injury. She shivered. “She’s the only one I know who smiles and giggles after tripping and tearing her leg to pieces.”

“Do you have to be so graphic when you say it?” I asked, planting my hand on my hip. Of course, didn’t I just lock the heart of the nymph who keyed my car into a seashell? I supposed that was rather violent and graphic, too.

“She’s right, Cammy!”

Bitter disappointment crept through me. I was a horrible person for being so jealous. *She’s wanted this longer than I have. Much longer.* I squashed the envy and willed myself to be happy for her, to be ecstatic for *them.*

“How did you hurt yourself?” I asked, sliding down into one of the armchairs.

I hoped the numbness in my voice was not too apparent.

I should be happy. Mom is free, the hunter is gone, my brother is happy, and Lorelei has what she’s wanted for centuries.

“Dancing out of the restaurant in those six-inch death traps,” he muttered.

When he skulked to the bathroom a few moments later, she smiled at me. “Thank you, Charlotte.” She ran her thumb over the ridges of the shell and swallowed hard. “For everything. You’re amazing.”

And then she started crying again. Loud, irritating sobs that racked her skinny frame and made her lift her leg from the pillow. She motioned me to her and got tears in my hair and on my shirt. Her rambling was a mixture of pain, happiness, and just a drop of former ‘psycho siren’.

Cam came back in the room for just a second only to turn back around. His groan about hormones was loud enough for Lorelei and me to hear. I pulled away from her and gritted my teeth into what I hoped looked like a smile. “You should probably work on the crying. You know, because most normal humans don’t do that. It weirds people out and you don’t want some random stranger suggesting therapy, do you?”

“I’m just so happy. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Her human heart that had a normal beat.

“No problem . . . it’s awesome,” I said.

If it was so *awesome*, why was I resentful?

“I have a surprise for you, too,” she said. I cocked my eyebrow and she continued. “Your trespassing ticket never happened. I sort of interfered earlier this week.”

After my night, the news failed to excite me but I smiled and nodded my gratitude. At least that was one thing I didn’t have to stress over, regardless of how insignificant it was in comparison to the

rest of my worries. “It was Eva,” I blurted. “The hunter. She’s a—was a nymph.”

She said the name slowly then bugged her eyes. “I *know* her—well, I guess I should say knew her. You do understand that this is a first, right? Demeter doesn’t hire girls, much less a nymph. She considers them just a notch or two above sirens on the Olympus social ladder.”

“That’s just it. Eva wasn’t hired by Demeter; she said she was doing it for a demigod.”

Lorelei’s eyes were about to pop out of her head. “Do you know which one?” she squealed.

“Matt.”

***

His call at four in the morning caught me off guard. I quickly agreed to meet him out at Plum Cove. Maybe it was dangerous, but I had too many questions to brush him off. It did not take me long to throw on a baggy t-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms I plucked out of the dryer. I reached the beach in less than ten minutes and found him looking out toward the sea. He wore jeans and a blue flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows.

Maybe he thought his tattoos were my weakness or something.

“You came,” he said, blinking a few times, as if he expected me to stand him up.

His gaze settled on my face. My hand flew to the spot he touched yesterday. When I brushed my teeth before leaving home, I glimpsed my reflection in the mirror. The mark from his fingertips was still there. Faint, but definitely visible. “Why wouldn’t I?”

He gestured to my cheek and walked closer. He stopped once the toes of our shoes met. “Thought you’d bolt.”

“You’re the one who said you were going away to work with your dad,” I softly reminded him.

“I, ah, *am* leaving town in a couple days. Something entirely different, though. I’ve sort of been summoned.” He angled his head to one side. “They call, I go.” Avoiding my eyes, he slipped his hands into his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels.

“Doesn’t that make you a tool?” I asked. He did not answer me, and I added, “Eva tried to kill me last night. Thanks a lot.”

Even though he was staring down at his shoes, I saw the grimace cross his face. Cynical and a little frustrated. “Char . . .”

“Did you send her after me, Matt?” My words seemed to echo off the tide, ringing loudly in my ears.

“Yeah.”

“So, you’ve probably known what I am ever since the first day of summer school.” He shook his head, and I thought back to when I cut my fingers. It made me sick that he knew then I wasn’t hurt, that he

made such a big deal about asking me how my injury was doing. He'd only done so to toy with me.

"And you didn't say *anything*? You probably had a real good laugh, huh? Bet you joked with all the other half-gods about misleading the stupid siren." My voice was shrill now, somewhat maniacal. Mostly just hurt. "Maybe I could have forgiven you for that, but then you sent your girlfriend to kill me. Because, that shit's normal?"

"I sent her after you because I didn't think she'd succeed," he whispered.

What did that mean? He turned his back to me and sat down. I was not letting him off that easy. I walked in front of him and knelt down, cupping his chin to make him look at me. The electric current that twisted through my arm was distracting, but not as much as the desire to know more. "You didn't think she'd succeed?"

He maneuvered out of my grasp. Our eyes warred, a silent battle between gray and dark brown. I won because he gave up and spoke. "I owe Demeter. Big time. Eva was one of my attendants and hell, you met her. She was crazy about me. Crazy enough to take over the job Demeter gave me to do."

"So you sacrificed her?"

Matt cocked one of his eyebrows, and the look on his face challenged my remark. "Yeah, and if I had to do it again, I would because"—he brought his hands by his ears and did lame finger quotes—"sacrificing her was worth saving you."

I wanted to be flattered that my potential death did not make him giggly inside, but it was impossible. Someone else was dead because of his manipulation. If Wyatt turned out to be a bad apple, I was giving up on boys completely. I crossed my arms over my chest. "I don't appreciate it. In fact, I think you're a shitty person. You do realize that her soul is gone, don't you? That she has no chance for an afterlife. You just broke, like, a hundred rules."

But you were the one who killed her.

He didn't say it, but the words hung in the air. He stood up again. I pushed myself to my feet. We watched as the sun started to crawl over the ocean. When the strained light kissed the side of his face, he said, "I called you to warn you."

"Warn me?"

"I skirted around the rules to protect you. You, on the other hand, broke quite a few. Telling your . . . *boyfriend* pretty much boned you."

I didn't know if I was more scared of being in trouble with the gods or irritated at the disgusted way he said boyfriend. "What kind of trouble?"

He lifted his shoulders. "Hell, I'm not even supposed to know that." His grin widened, and he added, "But keep a close eye on your mortal.

You know, just in case they decide to mess with him to get to you."

My mouth fell open, and I gawked at him as he began to walk away. Why was he smiling about the gods using Wyatt to punish me? The Matt I became friends with over the summer wasn't sadistic.

That Matt was a lie.

Finally, I found my voice. "How do I even know you're telling the truth? It's against their rules to hurt mortals!" I yelled over the sound of waves crashing behind me.

His body shook like he was laughing, but he continued walking in the other direction. "It's against their rules to send demigods to hunt sirens, Goose. Besides, my dad's the messenger for the gods."

Hermes.

Wonderful. Another boy whose father completely despised me.

***

I took Wyatt to see the view from The Lighthouse tower that afternoon, and he was wheezy, remembering his fall from the rocks weeks before. He pinned me against the railing and tried to talk me into going to Boston to meet his friends next weekend.

"You sure your dad won't have something to say about that?" I teased, twisting around and sliding my butt onto the railing.

"Don't do that. It scares me," he said, peering over the edge and shuddering at the sight of the rocks and sea below. I wanted to remind him that it did not matter if I fell—I would resurface without a scratch.

Laughing, I took my hands from the rail and wiggled my fingers in his face. I leaned back and poked my tongue out when his eyes widened. "You're avoiding my question, Golden Boy."

He crept nearer, parting his lips like he planned to respond. "You're beautiful in this light."

"Times up," I said, lifting my legs and letting myself fall from the tower. Desperate yelling followed me. I smiled as I hit the ocean. No transparent bodies formed in the water today, nobody called for my help. It was calm. As I swam to the surface, I even tried to convince myself that my life was not entirely bad.

I had Wyatt, after all.

Lightning and thunder cracked simultaneously overhead as I emerged from the ocean. Wyatt raced up to me, out of breath and flushed from his trip down the tower. In one swift motion, he jerked me to him. That ridiculous, cocky smirk spread across his face, even as he tried to catch his breath, and I feigned a frown.

"You're impatient and scary an—"

I covered his mouth with the tips of my fingers and shook my head. "You talk too much." Standing on my toes, I pressed my lips to his. Part of me was still upset he came after me last night, and I poured

my anger into the kiss. I didn't care that I could hardly breathe. Barely think.

Thunder continued to crash across the sky, casting dark shadows across the beach that the lightning occasionally brightened. I knew this storm was because of all of the rules I broke. I would deal with it later. I heard the earsplitting pound of a heartbeat, and I froze. *One, two, three . . . nine, ten, eleven . . . thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two . . .*

"I hate when you make that face," he said, pulling back. One of his eyebrows lifted as he looked into my eyes.

I placed the palm of my hand over his chest and finished counting. "I love the sound of your heartbeat." Today, the beat was not steady.

Today, his heart sped for me.

I love you, Wyatt.

"I'm glad you moved here," I whispered. I wanted to say more, wanted to ask for more. I couldn't. He smiled and lowered his head again. I pushed the Solstice from my mind. I didn't think about Matt or the shock of his touch or even his warning from this morning.

Now was important.

Wyatt was now.

"Me too," he said.

And I reminded myself that immortality was not forever.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Jenkins lives in Tennessee with her husband and two small children. When she's not writing young adult fantasy or cleaning Crayola off walls, she enjoys going to the gym and over-indulging in old musicals. She may or may not be slightly addicted to Disney princess films and sour gummy worms.

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